NOVEL 2
THERE'S NO FREAKING WAY I'LL BE YOUR LOVER!
UNLESS...
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AMAORI RENAKO
Did a brilliant job of turning over a new leaf for high school. Wants to be best friends with Mai.
"This is Amaori Renako. My fiancée."
NO! I SCREAMED INTERNALLY.
ODUKA MAI
A teenage girl who is perfect in every way. Wants to be girlfriends with Renako.
AMAORI HARUNA
Renako's younger sister, an eighth grader. Unlike Renako, she's more of an extrovert.
"WAIT, WHAT?"
"Oh my god. Your uniform looks super cute on you!"
That's when I realized I'd let my mouth run and say something really stupid.
KOTO SATSUKI
A black-haired beauty and a big reader. Has, ahem... special feelings for Mai.
"Wait, Satsuki-san?"
Satsuki-san and I both stared at each other, equally dumbfounded.

"Uh, yeah, uh... Of the tub, yeah..."
"I take it you're a big fan? Of the tub, that is."
"Beautiful, Satsuki-san!"
At Satsuki-san's house

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2

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Teren Mikami

ILLUSTRATED BY

Eku Takeshima

Seven Seas Entertainment

WATASHIGA KOIBITONI NARERUWAKE NAIJAN, MURIMURI!
(MURI JA NAKATTA!?)
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Prologue

I'D BEEN TRICKED! Beguiled! Fooled! I, Amaori Renako, completely average first-year high school student, was shaking like a leaf. I was at a party in a truly impossible hotel, the likes of which the common man could never dream of setting foot inside. It was an ominous realm far beyond the likes of us mere mortals, a place where men in business suits and women in full-length ball gowns strutted their stuff.

Meanwhile, there was me: decked out in a black dress that looked more like a cosplay than anything else, and as forlorn and helpless as a lone castaway adrift on a raft on the Pacific Ocean. My vision narrowed, and everything sounded like it was coming from far away. This wasn't just the ordinary discomfort that came from being somewhere new. I felt like I was gonna throw up.

All the big shots gathered at the tables around me were hobnobbing about stocks and foreign currencies and whatnot, I could just tell. Every word of it was flying over my head, mind you, but that had to be what they kept going on about.

Just then, I heard people oohing and aahing somewhere across the room. The commotion was like a typhoon wrapped in a cascade of flowery words that steadily drew closer to me. The crowd of people parted, and a gorgeous blonde girl stepped out of the throng. She wore a vibrant red dress that looked like it had been woven from brilliant scarlet rubies. Her grace set her apart from all the women around her, and every part of her, right down to her fingertips, screamed nobility—her shapely nose, her sweetly sensual lips. Her eyes shone as bright as the sun, captivating every person at the party and refusing to let them go.

With the whole crowd's eyes trained on her, the girl, Oduka Mai, stopped in front of me.

She instantly broke out into a gentle, charming grin. "How is it?" she asked. "Are you enjoying yourself?"

I, on the other hand, looked dead inside.

"I'm going to kill you," I muttered. "I'm going to freaking kill you."

“Oh, you’re always such a character,” she said, holding a hand to her mouth with a dignified titter. Was my utter disgrace that funny?

“What am I even doing here…?” I asked her. Even I was surprised by how thin and whiny my voice came out.

“I invited you, and you gave me your enthusiastic consent, of course,” she said.

“Really? You sure you aren’t misremembering things?”

My brain wasn’t feeling all that functional, but I tried to recall my most recent memories. This whole snafu began when Mai suggested taking me out to dinner as an apology for all the trouble she’d caused. I’d figured that wouldn’t be too bad, so I’d given her the okay. No biggie… But wait, I’d thought. Hadn’t I asked her not to take me anywhere freaky? I’d learned a thing or two about Mai by being her friend with Rena-fits, so I’d figured it wouldn’t hurt to ask her and check.

By the way, this “friends with Rena-fits” thing was a new relationship type that Mai and I had embarked upon. We had the next three years until graduation to figure out exactly what kind of relationship it was. Which was all fine and dandy. But.

Mai said it was just going to be a hotel buffet. It was kind of a nicer hotel, so she’d asked me to wear a dress. The idea was embarrassing, but I went, “Yeah, yeah, whatever floats your boat, twist my arm, guess I’ve got no choice,” and gave her the okay on that too.

And now this! I’d been naive to take Mai at her word. I’d learned nothing. What was I even doing here? Where did it all go wrong? Junior high? Elementary school? Or maybe even kindergarten?

Even as my life flashed before my eyes, an endless parade of people came up and greeted Mai. All of them—women with hourglass figures who looked like celebrities, hunky dudes in crazy expensive-looking suits—awaited their turn to pay their respects to Mai. But this wasn’t just an image on the silver screen. This was full-on reality.

Since way too many people were coming up to talk to her, Mai mistakenly thought she was boring me and flashed me a smile. “Sorry,” she told the line. “I’m with my companion right now.” No, don’t turn them down! I thought. You can just ignore me here forever.

“Oh my,” said a beautiful woman in bright red lipstick. “A friend

of yours, Oduka-san? You must introduce us." Her smile was overwhelming—I felt like I was about to melt.

Mai placed her hand on my back. If she'd said, "This is my classmate," I would've stood about a 2 percent chance of stuttering out a "N-nice to meet you" in response. But, of course, she didn't.

"This is Amaori Renako," she said instead. "My fiancée."

No! I screamed internally. *You can't just tell people something that sensational!*

In an impressive display of tact, the woman went, "Oh my," and touched her hand to her mouth. She gave me an elegant smile in spite of her astonishment. "Well, I hope you have a wonderful time this evening, Amaori-san."

"Yes," I croaked.

While my mind went blank, everyone else vacated the area. Apparently, Mai was done saying her hellos.

She sighed in relief. "Now we can finally be alone, Renako," she said. Her hair ran straight down her back, sparkling like the Milky Way. "What do you feel like having? If anything sounds good, I can go and bring it back for you."

"I don't think I could keep down a single grain of rice," I said.

"What, really? Are you not feeling well? You could have just told me you don't have an appetite. Now I feel guilty."

"Thirty minutes ago, I was starving!"

My raised voice drew attention from the surrounding tables, which stung. They all looked at me like: "Who's that country bumpkin?" "How frightfully vulgar." "Who dared to bring such a lowly peon to tonight's extravaganza?" "She absolutely doesn't belong here." (Okay, that was my imagination talking.)

I couldn't handle it any longer. Staying there another minute longer would have crippled me. I was the kind of girl who fled to the roof when the mere act of talking with my popular, extroverted school friends became too draining. And now she expected me, an incompetent beast capable of nothing but clinging to a tree and eating eucalyptus

leaves, to survive in the savannah with the cream of the social crop?

I took Mai's arm in an iron grip.

"Hmm?" she said. "What's the matter?"

"Never mind that, just come on!" I snapped.

Mai put down her glass of orange juice on our round table and shrugged slightly. The gesture put me in mind of some popular girl resigned to being dragged around by her pushy lover, which pissed me off all the more.

After an obstacle course of dipping, dodging, and ducking people's stares, we ended up in a large, pristine women's bathroom. In the same stall, no less. Just us, two teenage girls sharing a narrow, quiet, dimly lit stall. Whew… Wait, no, this wasn't the time to get comfortable.

I whisper-screamed, "Oduka Maiii!"

"What did you drag me in here for?"

Oh, stop blushing! I thought. "You really don't get the first thing about me," I said. "Do you seriously have no idea why I'm upset?!"

Mai put a hand to her chin and thought the question over for several seconds.

"There were quite a lot of Italian dishes on the table. I've seen you eat pasta before, so I could have sworn you liked Italian. Was I wrong?"

"No, I don't care about that! And I like Italian! Pasta, pizza, spaghetti alle vongole—they're all good!"

"Oh, good to know. Then I do know the first thing about you after all."

"Ugh, I just can't with you anymore!"

There wasn't much room, but I gestured as best as I could. I wanted to show her with my whole body how absurd this was.

"I!" I began. "Thought you were just taking me to get food! Like I said! So why the heck did you bring me to this freaking party?!"

"Isn't this taking you to get food?" she asked.

"You apparently don't understand Japanese!"

I buried my face in my hands. I wanted to go home and cry into

my blanket.

Mai grew more serious. “I must have made another mistake,” she said.

“…Oh, Mai.” All the wind went out of my sails. “No, I mean… Well, yeah, you did, but…”

“This chef is well known for their talent, so I wanted you to let you have a try,” she went on. “But there’s no point if it doesn’t make you happy.”

“Well, I appreciate the sentiment at least.”

Mai smiled rather forlornly, and my heart ached. Unfortunately, I was so inherently introverted that showing up at this flamboyant event was enough to do me in. This was a me problem, so it wasn’t exactly Mai’s fault or anything. Sure, she obviously didn’t understand this part of me, but still. All this happened just because she’d wanted to make me happy.

“…What’s this party for anyway?” I asked.

“I believe the investors in my mother’s company held this as a seasonal event,” said Mai. “It isn’t for any one particular purpose.”

“People hold parties for no reason?” What kind of kooky wonderland nonsense was this?

“My family receives invitations for festivities all 365 days of the year,” Mai said. “That’s why I didn’t think it was anything exceptional to bring you to this one.”

“You’re incredible, Oduka Mai.” At that point, that was about all I could think anymore.

Since we lived in two separate worlds, we were bound to occasionally misunderstand what the other one considered normal; I already knew that, and this just reaffirmed it. Getting angrier at her wouldn’t be productive at all.

I dipped my head. “Sorry,” I said, “but I’m going to head home. It looks like there are tons of people you know here, so go on and have a good time with them.”

She grabbed my wrist and pulled me closer.

“What are you talking about?” she asked. “I couldn’t possibly let you go home alone.”

“N-no, I mean… Look, I’m not trying to be nice or anything. I just want to clear up that whole misunderstanding. I’m not your fiancée…”

Beaming, Mai said with utter nonchalance, “But you’re my girlfriend, so of course you’ll be my fiancée. I’m sure I’ve told you my plans to marry the first person I’ve ever dated.”

She ran her hand through her blonde hair with a whoosh. Dressed the way she was, this familiar gesture made my heart skip a beat. Urgh! That dress gave Mai an unfair combat advantage.

Mai and I were still currently in the thick of our competition. I’d thought we would do away with the whole ponytail = best friend, hair down = girlfriend rule, but Mai had stuck with it. I guess she really liked it.

At any rate, I kept putting my foot down. I insisted that we were friends, not lovers. Unfortunately, Mai didn’t seem to want to get with the program.

By the way, her hair was very down right now.

“But I’m telling you, you can’t just introduce me like that,” I pleaded. “It, you know, gives people the wrong idea.” I balled my hands into fists.

Mai lowered her eyes, her voice suddenly tinged with seduction. “But,” she whispered. That was enough to make my heartbeat go into overdrive. Urgh! Too sexy! “If I don’t say that,” she declared, “someone else might try to woo you away from me.”

Mai’s too-beautiful face came closer, and I instinctively turned away.

“Th-th-that would never happen,” I said. “I’m just a lowly, common plebeian.”

Mai’s nose nuzzled the nape of my neck. Eeep!

“In my eyes,” she said, “you’re Cinderella.”

I heard a wet kissing sound from the vicinity of my neckline. She was kissing my bare skin! Oh my god.

“You look absolutely wonderful today,” she told me.

“Yeah, but you know the saying about putting lipstick on a pig…”

“The dress you’re wearing was made for you,” she insisted.

It was hard to brush this off when she looked this good. Her mermaid-skirt dress hugged her body so tightly that every one of her curves stood out. Mai was by far the main attraction here, but the dress served to make her beauty all the more brilliant. If they were a ring, the dress was the setting and Mai the gemstone, a far cry from my situation, where my dress outclassed me ten times over. If she and I had been alone together, I might have ogled her for hours. So imagine the absurdity of someone that unbelievably dazzling burying her face in my chest.

"H-hey now, Mai," I said.

"When you and I touch," she said, "I can feel more than ever that you were destined for me."

"N-no way," I insisted. "I just happened to be someone who listened to you when you were feeling down, right? It was a coincidence. It didn't have to be me."

"Haven't I told you before? There was nothing coincidental about it. I'm firmly convinced it was destiny. And there's no point in wondering about if it hadn't been you—because it was you."

I had no idea why, but Mai's hair smelled really good. I'd heard people say that pheromones were actually the smell of good chemistry. When someone's body odor smelled good to you, it meant you wanted them on a genetic level. This implied that my DNA had been thoroughly suffused with Oduka Mai-ness, which presented a problem for me. What do you think you're doing down there, DNA? You've got this all wrong! Look, in the first place, we're both girls!

"I-I get the picture," I said. "Believe me, I get how you feel already!"

"Then don't you think it's rather unkind of you to go home and leave me here all alone?"

"W-well, but that's because you introduced me as your fiancée!"

Flirtatiously, Mai pushed me up against the wall of the stall. I couldn't move a muscle. Literally! I couldn't even put my arms around Mai's back, only stand there as my heart rate continued to tick up.

Then, outside the stall, I heard several people talking at the sinks.

"Hey, did you see?" said one. "Oduka-senpai is here today."

"Yeah!" said another voice. "Crazy, right? I totally flipped out,

’cause it’s been way too long since I’ve seen her in person. Her face is freaking tiny, her legs are suuuuper long, and she’s, like, legit top-class!”

Judging from the content of this conversation, these seemed to be Mai’s modeling kouhai speaking.

“So, I heard that she brought along the person she’s engaged to,” the voices continued.

“Wait, for real?! Tell me more!”

“I didn’t get a look, but you know she’s gotta be marrying someone like Chris Evans or Brad Pitt.”

“Oh my god, that is too perfect for her!”

In my head, I apologized mightily. I was only Amaori Renako. Mediocre appearance, mid-average grades, sub-par athletic ability…

“See, Mai,” I whispered. “You really shouldn’t be with someone like me…”

But it was like Mai was completely oblivious to both me beating myself up and the various comments from the peanut gallery. She laid her hand on my cheek, leaned down, and kissed me.

Mmph, mmph! This wasn’t some momentary kiss either; no, it was a kiss rich with affection, and her slippery tongue dove through my lips. Mmph… Mmm…

Mai already went overboard with affection by default, but this was so over the top that I felt all the strength drain from my body. I couldn’t have even told you if it felt good or not. The only thing I knew was that I was being filled to the brim with Mai-ness.

After a while, I heard the other girls leave the bathroom, and we broke apart. Her lips were noticeably shinier than usual.

I let out a small whine. I couldn’t believe we’d just done that in this little stall, separated from the rest of the bathroom by that thin wall.

I went to wipe my mouth with the back of my hand but immediately remembered my makeup. With nowhere to put my hands, I fidgeted with them in front of my thighs. My lips felt like they were on fire.

“Oh, you’re so cute, Renako,” Mai sighed. She patted me on the

head, careful not to muss my hair in the process, and all I could do was hang my head.

Listen, the reason I wasn't saying anything was because of how awkward it was. Plus, I was still gasping for breath, and my chest ached for some weird reason. I couldn't call this fun, not in a billion years. I knew it all along… There was no freaking way I could be her lover!

Afterward, Mai and I left the party together, and she took me home. It was the first time in my life I'd ever ridden in a limousine. Once it pulled up in front of my house, I stepped out, and Mai, still in her full gown, waved to me.

"See you tomorrow at school," she called.

"Yup, see you later… And make sure you put your hair up this time."

Mai giggled but didn't say a word as she left. Hey, promise me! Bah.

I opened the front door at the exact moment that my sister happened to wander by wearing nothing but a towel, fresh from the bath.

"What do you think you're doing walking around dressed like that?" I asked.

It'd been ages since the last time I'd seen my sister half-naked. But now, courtesy of all those sports she did, I was treated to the view of my sister's developing figure and itty-bitty waist. She looked like a total party girl. But of course, as this was moments after seeing Mai, I knew that, deep down, my sister was just another Amaori.

Meanwhile, my sister stared at me, slack-jawed. "I can ask you the same exact thing," she said. "What's with the getup?"

"Huh?" Then, in a flash, I remembered what I looked like. Standing right in front of her was none other than…yup, me (wait, me?) in a shockingly top-of-the-line dress.

"Oh, uh, well," I said. In my rush to get home as soon as possible, I hadn't changed! Gah! Panicking, I answered, "Well, uh, Mai kind of invited me to this, um, party."

"A party?!" my sister shrieked. Her eyes glowed just as brightly as

that one time I'd brought home her favorite cake as an unexpected treat.

Wait, was this…? Was this the same thing she'd bestowed upon me just once before? The thing that felt so good: a look of respect?

I was completely checked out mentally, but my mouth started talking on its own. "W-well, yeah, I guess," I said. "There was an awful lot of people, I suppose. But it was just some shindig Mai's company's investors put on. They sent me an invitation too, so I had to dress up a little, you know?"

"Oh my god," my sister breathed. "A-amazing."

"The food was a buffet with a ton of Italian dishes all made by this famous chef. I mean, if I had to say… It was pretty incredible, yeah."

"Oh my god!"

Yeah, true, but I hadn't touched a bite of it!

I was not about to breathe a word of the fact that my face had been white as a sheet and I'd looked like I was on the verge of death the whole time. Instead, I put on the air of a lady and minced my way over to the dining table.

"What's for dinner tonight, Mom?" I called.

"Hey, but didn't you eat at the hotel?" my sister asked.

Yeah, but there's no beating home cooking!

Ashigaya High School was a co-ed public school along the Keiou line, known for its solid academics. In terms of what set us apart (and did this really count?), the teachers and students were all pretty chill. Put charitably, everyone was well mannered. Put less charitably, no one gave a damn about anyone else's business.

But starting this year, our school burst onto the scene with something that really made us stand out from the crowd. And what was it? Well, that went without saying. The Amaterasu of Ashigaya High School, Oduka Mai! The minute our superstar enrolled, she became Ashigaya High's claim to fame. I wouldn't be surprised if the pamphlets for next year's students had "Oduka Mai attends here!" emblazoned front and center on the cover. With her good looks, obscene riches, and great personality, she was Ashigaya's cultural heritage.

女

Fundamentally speaking, the lower classes could never approach someone as exalted as Mai. However, I heard there was a foolhardy student who'd hit her with the "Let's be friends!" approach shortly after the first day of school.

That student's name? Amaori Renako.

It was all part of my plan to have an awesome time in high school and transform myself from the loner loser I'd been back in junior high. And my plan couldn't have gone better. That was, if we ignored the fact that I ended up being way less emotionally steady than I'd expected! I paid for my mistakes—being in a friend group way out of my league whittled my spirit down day after day. But Amaori Renako's battle had just begun. (The End.)

Oh, but I guess it's actually (To be continued). I was only a slightly changed woman today.

"Man, being at school's so calming," I sighed as I flopped across my desk in the still-empty classroom. Yup, here I was: the new Amaori Renako, she who had successfully overcome last night's party. (I hadn't.) To Neo-ori Renako, school wasn't just a collection of familiar faces or a group of kids my age. My classmates were already like family to me. Who, me? Screw up and act all weird around them? No way.

I was in the midst of feeling like I'd made some real, first-class growth when the classroom door opened and in walked a girl with long black hair and a cool attitude: Koto Satsuki-san. She was a first-year student too, but she had all the perfect looks of an actress in a suspense flick, and there was an air of something mysterious and enchanting about her. She was about as tall as Mai, and her impeccable posture was as sharp and beautiful as a deadly blade.

"You're early, Amaori," she remarked.

"Huh? U-uh, yeah, I guess I am. It just works out that way sometimes, you know?"

Well, I'd gotten to school before anyone else to shove the dress I'd borrowed back into Mai's locker without anyone noticing, but you know… Bringing up Mai around Satsuki-san right now was like stepping on a powerful land mine, so my instinctive reaction was to avoid mentioning it.

Satsuki-san's eyes gleamed like a cop giving me a speeding ticket.

“Really, now?” she said.

“Uh, well, yeah.” I hadn’t done anything wrong, but I still broke out in a cold sweat. If I were a koala, then the gleam in Satsuki’s eyes made her a python. She’d opened up to me a bit in that kerfuffle the other day, but talking to her was still crazy frightening.

Normally, after saying hi, Satsuki-san would take her seat and begin studying on her own or maybe open up a book. But today, for some reason, she stood right in front of my chair and glared down at me. Hey, whatever happened to my classmates feeling like family? Why did I get the feeling I was practically standing in a monster’s mouth?

I resigned myself to my fate and looked up. “I-is…there anything I can help you with today, ma’am…?”

“I’m glad you asked,” she said. “Say, Amaori.” Taking my unintentional and very unnatural formality in stride, she gestured with her chin out the door. “Can you come with me for a minute?”

Hello, déjà vu.

Up on the roof, Satsuki-san and I stood side by side in the shade of the water tower and looked up at the sky.

She broke the silence with, “Rather hot today, isn’t it?”

“You’re telling me.”

Now that it was July, the weather had drastically warmed up. I could hear the cicadas on the ground having a grand old time singing away, and all that noise felt like it was sapping my strength. Ashigaya High had nice air conditioners in the classrooms, so what was the point of coming all the way up here?

As I drooped like a worn-out dog, Satsuki-san fanned herself with her hand without so much as breaking a sweat. I guess it’s true what they say: beautiful women never perspire…

At any rate, even just being alone with Satsuki-san was draining my emotional energy. If I also ran out of fluids, I could very well keel over at any moment. *Come on, talk already, and then let’s get back to the nice, cool classroom!* I thought.

“M-might I ask whatever it is you needed me for?” I prompted.

Satsuki-san didn’t say anything. Uh, but she was the one who

called me out here!

"U-um," I began again. "Is this about the whole Mai thing?"

Satsuki-san's cheek twitched.

"Sorry." I bowed on reflex, picking up on the unspoken feeling that I needed to apologize.

"You don't need to be," she said. "You are correct, after all."

Right now, Satsuki-san and Mai were smack dab in the middle of a cold war. As a result, Satsuki-san had been keeping her distance from the main friend group, and of course neither had spoken a word to each other in days. I was pretty sure it'd been like…a week already since Mai hosted that party at the hotel. That was a pretty long time to give someone the silent treatment, huh?

They were fighting because Mai had delivered a devastating message with absolutely no tact whatsoever. In the depths of her despair, she'd decided to punish herself by going to Satsuki-san and asking Satsuki-san to "comfort her." Mai's reasoning behind this was that Satsuki-san liked her, right?

Satsuki-san had gone ballistic. She'd decided that it was time to eradicate the diabolical tyranny of the supadari.

I knew jack squat about love, but I knew an awkward moment when I saw one. I didn't know if Satsuki actually did have a crush on Mai. But no matter if she did or didn't, what Mai said was just waaaay too Oduka Mai…

I hoped that Mai would hurry up and apologize so they could be friends again, but…unfortunately, Mai didn't even recognize that she'd done anything wrong.

"Oh, maybe," I suggested, "you want to make up with Mai, but you want my help since a straight-up apology is too embarrassing?"

After all, there was no better way to resolve this than by Satsuki-san being the bigger person. And best of all, it'd get me out of the awkward position of being trapped between these two quarreling superpowers!

Alas.

"Just who do you think is apologizing to whom?" Satsuki-san asked.

As her hair rippled, I rushed to amend myself, feeling like I was flailing to lock the door of a fierce wild animal's cage.

"M-Mai would be, uh, apologizing to you, I guess?"

"Correct," she said. "But surely that fool will never realize what a heinous act she has committed." Satsuki-san heaved a huge sigh. "So, you see, Amaori." She slowly drew closer to me. When she faced me head-on like this, I felt like I was trapped in her large, almond-shaped eyes. "I'll never be satisfied until I take my revenge against her," she swore. "It goes against my creed to let her get away with it."

"R-revenge is a bit much, don't you think?"

Satsuki-san was as deadly serious as an assassin who obliterated every last one of her targets. I had a bad feeling that if I stayed here any longer, I'd get wrapped up in some huge, terrible plot. It'd be the end of my whole high school experience. *No! Run away!* I thought.

"Sorry, Satsuki-san," I said, "I just remembered I have something to go take care of!"

Her arm shot out and slammed into the wall, blocking my path. It was the delight of girls the world over, the famous wall slam! Huh, so this is what one felt like? Not going to lie, more than anything else, I thought it was just straight-up freaky.

"But right now," she said, "I couldn't care less about revenge." She grinned at me, as stunning as a toxic orchid. *She couldn't care less?* I wondered.

"Hey, Amaori." She whispered my name into my ear and then exhaled. I trembled like a mouse cornered by a cat.

"Will you go out with me?" she asked.

This did not sound like she was asking me out. This sounded way more like the kind of invitation the snake used to tempt Eve.

A good five seconds passed. I stared into Satsuki-san's eyes, dumbfounded. Then, with all my might, I responded with a question of my own.

"Hello?!"

Chapter 1:
There's No Freaking Way I'll Be Your Lover! (Satsuki-san Edition)

MAI'S FRIEND GROUP consisted of the most top-notch, one-of-a-kind gorgeous girls in our grade. Our leader was the supadari, Oduka Mai. Then there was the angel who treated everyone with kindness (even yours truly), Sena Ajisai-san. Next, we had the little sister figure the whole class doted on, Koyanagi Kaho-chan. And last, there was the silent beauty with long, movie-star black hair, Koto Satsuki-san. Oh yeah, there was also one minor pipsqueak who got mixed in with all of them, but let's ignore her for now.

Among the whole group, Ajisai-san and Kaho-chan were the only two I talked with on a daily basis at school. Mai was so popular that we didn't talk a lot in class, but she was literally always bombarding me with messages in private. However, Satsuki-san and I had still barely talked one-on-one. I'd thought for the longest time that she hated me, but once I learned that this wasn't the case, I ended up being not quite as scared of her.

But with that being said…it was still absolutely bonkers that she'd fallen for me! I mean, I knew she couldn't possibly have fallen for me. It was just common sense.

Let me lay out what she actually meant. Satsuki-san wanted to take revenge on Mai, but Mai was mentally untouchable. Like, even if her apartment burned down, Mai was the kind of person to go, "Oh, it burned down? I suppose I'll simply have to spend the night in a hotel," and not give it another thought. (This is a made-up scenario courtesy of me.) So, in order to deal maximum damage against Mai, Satsuki-san decided to use me.

"Right, Satsuki-san?" I finished.

She shook her head at Renako Holmes's deduction. "Wrong," she said.

It was still before homeroom, and up on that blazing hot roof, Satsuki-san delivered the bald-faced lie, "I feel for you with all my heart. I've completely fallen for you, Amaori Renako. It frightens me

how much I feel this Amaori love."

"Why the heck are you saying that in a monotone?" I cried. Dammit! Well, if she was going to go that far, then why not ask? "What about me do you even like anyway?!"

"Huh?" she said. "Oh, good question." She folded her arms, holding one elbow, and gazed far off into the distance. After a few moments of thought, she suggested, "The fact that you know your place?"

"That's not a reason to like anyone!" And what was that question mark doing there at the end? If she was going to lie, the least she could do was lie with some conviction!

"What?" she asked. "Do you think I'm not good enough to be your partner?"

"Huh?! No, w-well, uh," I said. This impossible misunderstanding made me panic. Yeah, Satsuki-san scared the pants off of me, but if she was legit asking me out, then I was in no place to turn her down.

"No, no," I said. "It's not that you're not good enough for me. It's that you're so beautiful… And…"

"And?"

"Your voice is so cutting and gorgeous, and your posture is so dignified, and I think you're great… It's that even when I see you just sitting in class, not even doing anything, I think how cool you are… I wish I was as majestic and confident as you," I muttered, looking down at the ground.

This felt exactly like some socially inept weirdo professing their love to a favorite celebrity… *Yeah, that's right*, I thought. *Maybe I did idolize Satsuki-san.* (I realize this was kind of an odd time to have this internal conversation.)

"…I see," she said. "Thank you." Her cheeks turned pink, and she looked away from me. My honesty must have embarrassed her. Urgh! My throat tightened in shame.

"No, uh, I mean!" I stammered. I wanted to tell her at least this much, so I fought for dear life to force the words out. "There's no freaking way I'll be your lover! But I'm totally down to be your friend!"

"Oh, speaking of that," she said. "That reminds me. I heard you put Mai on hold."

“Ugh,” I groaned. “No, there’s no freaking way I’ll date anyone… It’s not a matter of Mai being bad or of anything you’ve done. I just have zero confidence that I can pull it off.”

Satsuki-san smiled, and my heart skipped a beat. It was a warm smile, like a ray of moonlight peeking through a crack in the hot clouds overhead. Huh?

“That’s all right,” she said. “A little bird tells me that we’ll break up after a month with no nasty falling out. So you don’t need to worry. Come on and date me.”

“Is that your idea of a pickup line?!” I screamed.

Just then, the bell rang for morning homeroom. You’re playing with my poor, pure heart, Satsuki-san!

It was only morning, and I was already exhausted… Wearily, I left the roof with Satsuki-san. She locked up behind us—I’d thought that I was the sole possessor of the holy blade, but it turned out there were tons of spare keys floating around—and we set off for class.

I wanted to make a beeline to the infirmary and fall asleep. They weren’t being serious about this whole going to class thing, right? Couldn’t I have nap class from first through sixth period?

But just then, as if things weren’t bad enough, who should we bump into in the hallway but Mai. Eeep.

“Good morning, Renako,” she said. “And…” Mai smiled at me cheerfully, but Satsuki-san passed right by her without saying a word. Oh my god.

I, at least, forced myself to grin and wave. “H-hey, Oduka-san.”

Mai made a thoughtful “Hmm” and put a hand to her chin.

Satsuki-san’s behavior was incredible. I think she was the only person in the whole school—heck, forget the school, all of Tokyo—who could ignore Mai. Just how badly had Mai hurt her…?

But Mai only smiled back, a smile that said, “If she cannot eat bread, why not let her eat cake? After all, I like cake better anyway.”

“Today must be a good day indeed if I’m seeing Renako before I even make it to class,” she said.

“Maaan, Oduka Mai!” I groaned, balling my hands into fists.

It was all Mai's fault that Satsuki-san had just asked me out, right? *Take some responsibility!* I thought. Yet, if I asked her to do that, I knew she'd just be like, "Of course I will," and then go out and buy a ring worth three times the average adult's monthly salary. So I was never, ever going to say that out loud! But still!

"Hmm?" Mai asked. "What's wrong? You keep staring at me. Do you think I look pretty today, perhaps?"

"Uh, yeah, duh? Oduka-san, you're literally always pretty!"

She chuckled. "You make me blush. I knew today was going to be a good day. Well, I suppose that's because every day is excellent when you're with me."

The sight of a bashful Mai filled my head with wild images of me repeatedly hitting her in the chest. This girl had zero situational awareness! Gah, this freaking girl.

I'd decided I'd call her "Oduka-san" at school, by the way. I figured Mai wouldn't care if I got too familiar with her, but I didn't want to cause her any trouble. My image of the perfect friends included both of us showing each other that kind of consideration, so this level of formality meant we were just as fast friends as ever.

Now some other students noticed Mai and came over. "Oh, it's Oduka-san," said one. "Good morning."

"Hey, is it true you put on a guitar concert the other day? Man, I really wish I could have been there!" went another.

In the blink of an eye, we'd gotten a whole crowd forming.

Mai was already in full superstar mode this morning. She went, "Hey, guys," and flashed them a free supadari smile. Eeep! Now that I was already weakened, those shrill voices squealing and OMG-ing hit me like a stun grenade. My head spun. I decided I'd tell Mai about the whole dress thing later and went back to the classroom. This Satsuki/Mai double punch combo had drained my HP.

By now, almost everyone had shown up for class. I tiptoed past Satsuki-san's desk, but she didn't say a word and let me reach my seat safely. Phew.

Wait, no. Why did I need to be so tense even in my own classroom? This wasn't a freaking top-secret spy mission or anything.

The girl in the seat in front of mine noticed me and greeted me

with a grin. “Hey, Rena-chan!” she chirped. Bathed in the morning light, her hair glowed like an angel’s halo. She was so pretty you’d think someone had made her from a magic recipe. Pour honey and kindness into sweet milk, mix in plenty of affection, and cast a spell. Poof! You’d have a Sena Ajisai-san on your hands.

I couldn’t help but smile and put my hands together like I was praying.

I sighed. “I can feel myself getting healed already.”

“Huh, what’re you talking about?”

“If you were in an RPG, you’d be a priestess, hands down.”

“You think?” she said. “I’d rather be a martial artist.” She readied her fists with a snap.

Yeah, that’d be pretty good too, actually. Imagine catching glimpses of her bare thighs through the revealing slits of her qipao during battle. Steamy!

“Ugh, forget it, Rena-chan,” she said.

“Oh, right. Sorry.”

“Huh? No, I was talking to myself. I meant—oh, never mind. Well, um.” Ajisai-san fidgeted. *How cute,* I thought. Wait, no. “See, I was on my way to class earlier when I, um, I saw you and Satsuki-chan walking together. I just thought that was kind of unusual, you know?”

I wanted to brush her off, but I just couldn’t. I ended up nodding meekly.

“Yeah, that’s fair,” I said.

“Did something happen?” she asked.

“Uhh…” *Oh yeah, for real*, I thought. *Get this: Satsuki-san just asked me out. But like hell could I say that!*

I must have made a weird expression, because Ajisai-san started waving her hands and backpedaling. “Oh, sorry, I didn’t mean it in that way at all,” she said. “It’s just, you know, I was just wondering if there was something going on. But it’s all fine, I promise. I’m not worried about you guys or anything, I swear. Um, uh—wow, it sure is hot today, huh?”

In her rapid-fire burst of speech, I lost track of what she was trying to say. Ever since that whole incident with Mai, Ajisai-san had

been befuddling me with her high-speed talking more and more frequently.

"Y-yeah!" I nodded, parroting that last part. "It's nice and cool inside!"

What on earth was this all about? Well, to be honest, I wasn't entirely clueless. It had to have been that snafu the other day after school where I'd babbled on about how much I liked her…

Well, there was no point in bringing it up now. I'd been so overloaded with everything going on, and my head just completely boiled over. Still, how could I have been so, so…! God, what an awful memory. Whenever it came back to me, I wanted to bury myself in my blanket and scream. Ajisai-san must have thought I was so pathetic and cringey… Heh heh… I'd gone way overboard in telling my friend just how much I liked her… It almost sounded like I told her I had feelings for her, you know?

Maybe it would have been better if she'd played it off as a joke, like, "Dang, Rena-chan, you were hella awkward back there lmao." But Ajisai-san was so nice that she'd never brought it up again. So we were still friends and pretended like it'd never happened. This girl was just too nice.

"Ajisai-san," I said.

"Huh? Uh, what?" She looked back at me, oddly flustered.

I bowed my head to her silently. "I must extend my humblest apologies for causing you such inordinate trouble on that prior occasion."

"Huh, what? Wait, what occasion?"

Ajisai-san went blank as she tried to register my completely sincere apology. She was cute even when confounded…

I might have taken a bit longer to turn her down if it'd been Ajisai-san who'd asked me out as opposed to Satsuki-san. But fat chance of there being a parallel universe where Ajisai-san could fall in love with the likes of me!

Wait, what was I even thinking?

Just then, yet another pretty girl popped up and rested her chin on the edge of my desk.

“Hey, hey, Rena-chin and Ajisai-chan!” she chirped.

This was Koyanagi Kaho-chan, the little sister to everyone at Ashigaya High. Boys and girls alike loved her for her unpretentious attitude. She was kind of like Mai in that regard. As a self-proclaimed Mai stan, she always wore a scrunchie the color of Mai’s hair wrapped around her side ponytail. She had striking features on her small, cute face, and always sported an adorable, vivid expression. Actually, if she just changed up her style a little, she had the potential to turn into a real tidy, first-class beauty. But that would put her way out of my league, so I was glad she stayed exactly as she was.

“Kaho-chan, class is about to start,” Ajisai-san reminded her.

“Yeah,” I added. “The teacher’s on her way.”

“Yeah, yeah, but before all that,” Kaho-chan said. She lowered her voice to a whisper to make sure no one else could hear us. “I wanna check in real quick about the you-know-what the week after next.”

“Oh, you mean the hang-out with the full group? That you-know-what?”

“Shh!” she shushed at great volume. “Rena-chan, you’re too loud!”

“Oh, sorry.”

“You were clearly much louder than she was, Kaho-chan,” Ajisai-san pointed out.

“Oh, don’t sweat the small stuff,” said Kaho-chan. “’Cause we’ve got a much bigger problem on our hands.” She glanced behind her at Satsuki-san and Mai. “You think those two’ll make up by them?”

“Good question,” Ajisai-san said. “It’s been kind of a long time now.” She and Kaho-chan nodded at each other sincerely.

Just like when we’d crossed paths this morning, Satsuki-san and Mai were not saying a word to each other. No matter what we bystanders said, in the end, this was a problem between the two of them. My thinking was that there wasn’t really anything the rest of us could do about it.

Yet Kaho-chan whined, “But I wanna hang out with everyone! I wanna, I wanna, I wanna, I wanna! Hanging out without everyone is no fun!” *When did Kaho-chan become a spoiled toddler?* I wondered.

She flailed her arms, pitching a tantrum, and then suddenly

stopped for just one second. She glanced up at me and then resumed flopping around like a fish out of water.

Wait, I knew what this meant! I gulped at the unexpected trial before me. Kaho-chan had given me an easy cue to read… It meant I had to…to tell her to knock it off…! Me! Stopping Kaho-chan in her tracks!

Shaking, I pinched Kaho-chan's fingertip and stammered out, "C-cut that out!"

Kaho-chan stopped like a robot with a dead battery and sent me a forlorn look. She sighed. "Thanks, Rena-chin. But I guess I just become a useless lump without Saa-chan around."

"S-sorry."

"I need those karate chops of hers that are so strong they make me forget how to cry or laugh. It's all about the force of it, you know?"

Behind her, I heard a voice saying, "I've never hit you like that." Looked like Satsuki-san had been listening all along.

"At the very least," Ajisai-san said, "maybe we could help if we knew what happened to them."

Her words made me tense up involuntarily. I mean, I knew, but… There was no freaking way I'd tell without Satsuki-san's permission, and there was also no freaking way Satsuki-san would ever give permission.

At the exact moment that the teacher walked in, Kaho-chan raised her fists sky-high and shouted at the ceiling, "But I won't give up! 'Cause the whole gang's gonna hang out, I swear! For now, I'm gonna do all I can to help them patch things up! You only get one summer of your first year in high school, you know!"

Kaho-chan's voice echoed around the otherwise silent classroom. Everyone could hear it. I snuck a peek at the two in question. Mai inclined her head slightly while Satsuki-san flipped through her notebook as if she hadn't heard anything.

"Koyanagi, take your seat," the teacher barked.

"Yes, ma'am!" Kaho-chan chirped. "Oh, I love that dotted maxi skirt you're wearing today! It's super-duper cute!"

"Much appreciated."

I sighed inwardly. Contrary to Kaho-chan's wish, Satsuki-san was

trying to do the exact opposite of making up.

Satsuki-san wasted no time before slipping off on her own during lunch. Mai was as chipper as ever, and as the four of us ate together, anyone watching us might have thought there was nothing going on. Just a group of friends getting along and eating lunch together.

I thought it'd be kind of weird to bring up the topic of Satsuki-san, so I kept quiet. But even though I tried to act like everything was normal, once I noticed her absence, it was glaringly obvious something was wrong. I almost felt paranoid. Was I just the kind of person to get way too anxious about this sort of thing?

Aw, nuts. Thanks to my awful people skills, even ordinary conversations stressed me out. And now I had to act like nothing was wrong? This was too hard for me. No way, no freaking way! I couldn't handle this forever! Sure, if they made up and we all went out together as a group, it'd be exhausting as heck for me, but…now wasn't the time to focus on that. I needed to do something about Satsuki-san and Mai's relationship, and soon, or I'd straight-up die!

I caught Kaho-chan in front of the bathrooms.

"Kaho-chan," I exclaimed, "let me help them make up!"

"Uh, okay…?" she said. "I like the enthusiasm you've got going on, Rena-chin!"

"Great! Well, I mean, I don't know what I can do. I don't know if there's even anything to be done in the first place, and I don't have any confidence or a plan…just the desire for them to make up. That's all I've got… Not even any social skills… Sorry."

"Huh?! Well, I'm glad for the sentiment alone, I guess… I'm not sure there's much else I can say."

And then later, after school, I got wrapped up in yet another situation where I ended up way in over my head.

After everyone in class had said their goodbyes to Mai, she came over to where the rest of us sat. "It's time to go home, girls," she said.

Ajisai-san and Kaho-chan were all packed up and ready to go, whereas I was the only slowpoke still dragging her feet. Same story as usual.

“Are we making any stops on the way home?” Ajisai-san asked.

“Good question,” said Mai. “I have some free time today. How does walking around a bit near the train station sound?”

“Sounds great to me. What do you think, Rena-chan?”

“Uh, yeah, sure,” I said. To be honest, I was counting the picoseconds before I could get home. But I couldn’t turn down an invitation.

Back in junior high, I’d been cursed with a trauma that prevented me from ever turning down invites. Thanks to Ajisai-san, I’d managed to partially overcome it, but it still wasn’t like I could just do whatever I wanted either. I mean, turning people down ate up a certain amount of brainpower already!

Mai’s sharp eyes picked up on my distress. “Oh, Renako,” she said, “do you have plans today? In that case, we can go alone. Right, Kaho and Ajisai?”

Urgh, there she went bailing me out again. Still, it really was a lifesaver.

Half-relieved and half-ashamed at my own pitifulness, I giggled awkwardly and gave her a spineless grin.

And just then, something soft wrapped itself around my arm and squeezed. “That’s right,” said a voice.

Huh? Mai, Ajisai-san, and Kaho-san all stared at me in surprise. Or, not at me, actually—at the raven-haired beauty standing next to me. Satsuki-san!

“Amaori and I have plans,” she said. “Come, let’s be on our way.”

“Hey, say wha—!”

She grabbed my arm like a girl demanding her boyfriend pay attention to her. No, more like a jailer slapping a prisoner in handcuffs!

“We have plans today, don’t we?” she asked.

“Uh, we do?!”

“Don’t we?”

Her eyes bored holes into mine. Written in them were the words, I don’t mind continuing that conversation we had this morning right here and now. It doesn’t bother me, but don’t you think it might have

repercussions for you, hmm? Hold up, was that a threat?

Kaho-chan, immediately catching on that something was up, snapped her fingers and yelled, “That’s right! You do! Well, have fun with Saa-chan, Rena-chin! Aa-chan and I will just be over here taking Mai-Mai home! Right? Riiight?” She winked at me furiously. Wink, wink, wink!

No, it wasn’t like that! This wasn’t some plan to help patch up their friendship. This was a plot to obliterate Mai!

Satsuki-san yanked on my arm. *S-somebody, help me!* I cried internally. “Right. Renako?” she hissed. Her eyes stabbed at me, and my heart skipped a beat. Oh no. If I balked too much, would Mai come to my rescue and start duking it out with Satsuki-san right here and now? Please, spare me!

“Y-yeah! That’s right!” I stammered out. “Sorry, gang, but I’ll see you all tomorrow!”

I guess it didn’t matter if Kaho-chan said it? I had to say it too?

I hurried away, clinging to Satsuki-san all the while. Behind me, I could hear Ajisai-san saying in a weak little voice, “Uh, R-Rena-chan? How come you’re linking arms?” It took all of my willpower to keep walking away and resist the urge to turn back. Because you see, Ajisai-san…this is all part of a plot to piss Mai off!

“Please have mercy on me,” I begged.

“I already told you, I’ll buy you whatever you want,” Satsuki-san promised. “It’s on me.”

“But this is a vending machine…”

“Do you have a problem with that?”

“Well, no…”

The machine clunked and spat out a green tea. As I grabbed it and gulped it down, the sharp bitterness helped clear my head a little.

Satsuki-san and I went back to our seats. She’d taken me to the food court in the station building. It was relatively empty, and nice and cool, but the way Satsuki-san sat in front of me resting her chin on her hand was giving me the chills.

She sipped at her own paper cup of water and remarked, “I don’t

like how this tastes." Then she unsuccessfully tried to suppress a snicker. "By the way, did you see the look on her face? We gave her quite the shock. This feels absolutely incredible."

Hers was a smile of pure evil.

"Well," I said, "then you've retaliated now, haven't you? Great! Your counterattack was a huge success. And now, starting tomorrow, you guys can go back to being friends!"

"Oh no, there's still plenty more to come, of course."

"Ah. Yeah, of course…"

Satsuki-san put a hand to her cheek and frowned as she looked at me. "You know," she said, "you really do mean something special to her."

"Wish I had the faintest idea why…"

"That much is inconsequential. What's important is that it means it'd be worth my time to date you."

"Honestly," I said, "I'm glad to see this is nothing but a calculated plan on your part."

"But I already told you that I like you," said Satsuki-san. "Why don't you just pretend that I'm not the best at expressing my feelings? What if that was the best I could do?"

"Well, that'd be cute! But that's not the case, is it?"

I put my hands on the table and leaned forward. She didn't recoil from me—just looked back with this honest, innocent expression. My breath caught in my throat. Her eyes were not the bright and pretty type. They were more dull and overcast. But, for all that, I still thought they were gorgeous. Satsuki-san's beauty was as soft and unobtrusive as the down on a bird. There was something melancholy about it that captured my attention, like looking up at the moon all alone late at night. It took hold of my heart and held it in a vice.

I groaned and turned away immediately. I was never going to win against her, not once.

"I'm sure she's given you plenty of trouble too, hasn't she?" Satsuki-san said.

"Well, I guess," I admitted.

Most recently, there was that party that Mai'd tricked me into

coming to with her. It felt like it'd shortened my life span by about a hundred years. I knew full well that if I didn't do something about her bossiness, then she'd continue to dominate me for as long as I lived. But the key, I thought, wasn't to go around plotting with someone else. I had to do it myself.

"But like I've been saying," I went on, "I'm not comfortable going about things in this way. Mai's just going to be hurt if she sees us dating… And I'd feel kind of awkward about pretending to date a friend, you know?"

Satsuki-san looked down into her paper cup, lost in thought. Then, in a tiny little emotionless whisper, she said, "A friend? Amaori, are you and I friends?"

"Huh?"

What did she mean? If I took the question at face value, I guess it was rather…challenging…to classify Satsuki-san as a friend, yeah.

"I-I'm not sure," I admitted.

"That's awfully honest of you," she said.

"Oh, come on!" I gripped the can of tea in my hands like it was a good luck charm. "We've barely talked one-on-one before! Plus, I'd get the shock of my life if I thought we were friends but you didn't! Also, if I was like, 'Of course we're friends! I care a lot about you, Satsuki-san!' I think you'd just get mad at me."

"I wouldn't get mad. I'd just ask you to work with me," she said.

"Ah-hah, so this was a trick question! Well, stop it!" I wailed. "Stop trying to pull me into this!" Her evil clutches assailed me from all directions, and I was already in tears.

But then she rested her chin on her hand again and said, "Fine. I get the point."

"Huh?"

She turned away from me with a sulky huff. "I knew right from the start that this wouldn't go well. I certainly wasn't trying to force you or anything. Sorry for making you come on this date with me."

"Oh. Well. Um." Being apologized to right out of the blue like this made me feel like my parents had taken me to some unknown town and then dumped me there. I didn't have the slightest clue what to do.

“Besides,” she continued, “you and I aren’t friends. We just happen to be in the same friend group. There, are you happy? Good, then we’re done here.”

And just like that, Satsuki-san brought our conversation to a close.

…I guess I was out of custody now. Still, it would have been pretty harsh of me to be like, “Sweet, then I’m off to go home and play video games” and just ditch her there…

“Uh,” I said.

“What now?”

I shot a glance at her. “So, would you guys be willing to make up?”

“…After this whole conversation, this is your takeaway?”

“Huh, did I screw up somehow?”

“You think?”

She glared at me like she was staring at a bug. Eep.

“But when you guys are fighting,” I insisted, “it makes everything really awkward for me. And going to school is hard enough for me as it is. If I start ditching, it’ll make a lot of trouble for my parents, you know…?”

“Hold on, Amaori,” she said. “Why do you look like you’re about to cry? Wait. Are you threatening me?”

I dunno…

“Hmmph, fine!” she snapped. Her voice rose in irritation. “Fine, I’ll make up with her. Happy? Just like before, I’ll let her off the hook for eeeverything, and she’ll keep going around thinking she’s done no wrong!”

“Oh,” I said. “Satsuki-san, that’s so nice of you.”

“But in return!”

“Eeep!”

She put up two fingers. “For two weeks,” she said, “I want you to date me. It doesn’t have to be more than two weeks. Once those weeks are up, I’ll make up with her.”

Two weeks would put us right into the start of summer vacation.

“And I beg of you, please,” she continued. “That fool has never so much as looked at me, but now I’ve finally discovered her weakness. Therefore…”

Satsuki-san bowed, ever so slightly. But still, she bowed. To me.

“I ask for your assistance,” she said in a more serious tone than I’d ever heard in my life.

It wasn’t a matter of Satsuki-san disliking Mai. Even I could see that. If not for Satsuki-san, I would never have known that Mai was throwing that party, and so I wouldn’t have been able to stop it. That would have probably led to Mai dating someone she didn’t even care about. This made Satsuki-san, in some sense, Mai’s guardian angel. Which meant that I couldn’t turn down her request…

I glanced back at her. “Well, if it’s only for two weeks, then I guess I can… But don’t ask me to be all extra, okay?”

“Very well.” Finally, Satsuki-san’s face relaxed into a smile that looked almost relieved. “Of course I won’t. Thank you, Amaori.”

“Yeah, no prob…”

“Then this means that you and I will begin a romantic relationship for the next two weeks, starting tomorrow. Correct?”

I whimpered. “Yeah…”

I couldn’t shake the feeling that I’d rushed into a really hasty decision. But all the same… Yeah. Even ignoring the fact that I was constitutionally incapable of turning down invitations or requests for help, I also just felt kind of bad leaving Satsuki-san high and dry. She wasn’t an average schmuck like me. She was strong. But even so, that didn’t mean she had to put up with getting the short end of the stick forever. I guess the part of me that was very familiar with that short end empathized with her. I wasn’t about to get involved in their tiff—no freaking way—but if this was what they needed to patch up their friendship, then so be it. It was for a good cause. And maybe, just ever so slightly, I found the prospect of Satsuki-san one-upping Mai and making her blow her lid entertaining. I was pitiful, okay?

“Thank you,” I mumbled stiffly. “It’s a pleasure to be working with you.”

And like that, for two weeks only, we decided to play at being girlfriends. First Mai, now Satsuki-san… I guess in some sense this was a

good opportunity. Unlike when Mai and I were switching off between being friends and lovers, these two weeks would be a relatively uninterrupted stretch of pure girlfriend experience. I'd be able to figure out just how badly suited I was for the whole romance thing.

At any rate, I needed to go into this with a positive attitude, or else I'd end up throwing in the towel on day one!

We packed up our stuff and left the food court. It was evening now, but the outdoors in July were still uncomfortably hot. It all started wearing me down. So much had happened today—most of it related to Satsuki-san.

Speaking of Satsuki-san, she stopped in her tracks the minute we left the food court.

"You good, Satsuki-san?" I asked.

"Do you have a minute to take a small side trip with me?" she said.

"Huh? Yeah, sure. Oh, uh, so long as it's not anywhere too crowded."

"What are you talking about?" she asked. "Don't worry, I'm not like that fool. And it will only take a moment."

Well, in that case. I tottered off after Satsuki-san on unsteady legs.

After less than five minutes of walking, we stopped at a shrine that was plunked down right in the middle of all these houses. The shrine grounds had been turned into a park, and right at the edge of it were some elementary-school-aged kids playing ball together on their way home. It was a relaxing, quiet place, with a cool breeze blowing through.

"This is pretty nice," I told her.

"It is," she agreed. "This place has a lot of memories for me."

We stepped through the torii gate and followed the narrow walkway up to a little shrine building. Satsuki-san looked super picturesque standing there in front of it. Not in the Mai way either. Hers was more of a traditional beauty. I bet she'd look great in a kimono, or in a shrine maiden's outfit.

"Uh, do you come here to hang out a lot?" I asked.

“I do. I come here when I want an extra burst of motivation, among other times.”

“Then you really must have made some good memories here, huh?”

“Sure,” she said. “I remember one time in elementary school when Oduka Mai was so upset she clung to me here.” Satsuki-san chuckled darkly.

“That’s your definition of a good memory?”

“It’s a fine sake whose taste will never fade,” she declared.

I wondered if this was a memory of a time when she’d scored a total victory over Mai.

“Why’d you bring me to a place with so many battle scars?” I asked.

“We’re teaming up to defeat her—can you think of a more fitting place in which to make our vows?”

“We’re not trying to defeat her!” I insisted. “We’re trying to make up! Fix friendships! Tie the knot!” Okay, maybe not that last one.

“Well, if you say so,” she said. “But remember, it’s only for two weeks.”

Satsuki-san pushed her hair behind her ear and turned around to face me. The setting sun behind her colored her cheeks a very faint shade of red, which caught me off guard and made my heart skip a beat.

“I’m full of faults, and people often tell me I’m as frosty as a yuki-onna. I’m well aware that I can be rather heartless. I may not be your preferred dating partner…but all the same, I always repay the favors done to me.”

Forget favors, this girl knew how to carry a grudge like nobody’s business.

“Uh, well, if we’re talking about my taste…” I began.

“You prefer blonde-haired, blue-eyed, three-quarters Japanese girls, don’t you?”

“I mean, it’s not like you run into those every day.”

“Then how about people like Sena?” she suggested.

“Eeep.” Ajisai-san’s name coming up out of nowhere almost made me pitch forward and fall. “Look, I don’t want you to get the wrong idea. I don’t like girls to begin with.”

“Really?” she said. “Then I certainly wouldn’t be your type, in that case.”

Well, uh… I didn’t exactly dislike girls either… Wait, no, no! Mai had gone and poisoned me for life!

“But in spite of that,” she went on, “you are still gracious enough to date me. Thus, it is now even more important that I act like a suitable partner for you.”

Wh-whoa, why was this ramping up so much? *No need to be that humble, Satsuki-san*, I thought.

“B-but I mean,” I stuttered, “you don’t really, you know, like me or anything, right? Don’t you just want to date me because Mai likes me?”

“Well, true,” she said.

See? I thought.

Then Satsuki-san told me flat-out, “My feelings for you have nothing to do with it. This is simply a contract between the two of us—one that I plan to honor.”

“This sounds like an arranged marriage,” I pointed out.

“True. In some respects, I suppose it’s similar.”

I guess there were all sorts of reasons to get married these days. Some folks wanted to have kids, while others went into it for financial reasons or just because they wanted the company. There were loads more reasons to get hitched than to just be with your loved one. Like our situation, for instance. Satsuki-san was trying to get back at Mai, and I was trying to get the two of them to patch things up. It was a contract where we both got what we wanted, which should have meant we stood on equal footing. But I guess Satsuki-san still didn’t think that was enough.

“Although our time together may be short,” she said, “I will do my very best to be a good wife to you.”

“Wait, whaaat?” I yowled. “L-look, don’t put it that way.”

My body felt like it was on fire. My w-w-wife.

Naturally, Satsuki-san looked embarrassed too. “There’s no call for being that startled,” she huffed.

“No way. Anyone would shoot out of their skin if *the* Satsuki-san said that to them.”

“*The* Satsuki-san aside,” she sniffed, “you’re doing me a favor by dating me. I suppose that makes this your lucky day.”

“Wh-what do you mean by that?”

Satsuki-san didn’t say anything and just looked at me. What now?

“Because,” she said, “you might just get lucky.”

I squeaked. Oh god, oh god, oh god. My head swelled like a hot air balloon with steamy fantasies. I frantically shoved them away before her sultry voice could manifest anything else. She was normally so surly, but seeing this special side of her produced almost enough whiplash to kill me. For a shy recluse like me, quiet Satsuki-san might have been much more my type than outgoing Mai!

“Hey,” she said. “Your face is bright red.”

“Huh?! Is it really?” Yeah, no doubt it was!

I couldn’t look Satsuki-san in the eye.

“Yes,” she said. “It is, and it was. Well, your preferences are your own business. So if you’d like, then I suppose I could…try my best for the time being to…”

“W-wait!” I cried. I wasn’t up for that kind of relationship! Forget dating, I knew for certain that I’d rather be friends. All this lovey-dovey stuff was nothing but a big pain in the butt! “Th-that’s not what I want! Not remotely! I’ve lived my entire life without ever wanting that!”

What on earth was I going on about? And at the top of my lungs, no less. Surely this wasn’t a shrine-appropriate conversation.

“Oh, thank goodness,” she said. “Even if you’d wanted that of me, I’m afraid I don’t know too much about it…”

“But I absolutely do not want it!”

She frowned ever so slightly when I shouted over her. “But you want it from Oduka Mai?” she asked. “I don’t fully buy that.”

“Don’t start getting competitive about that too! And I don’t want that from her either! Mai’s the one going after me all the time!”

“But I’m considered beautiful by society’s standards, aren’t I?”

“Are you kidding me? You’re crazy beautiful, Satsuki-san!”

Satsuki-san ran a hand through her hair and said, as nonchalantly as if she didn’t care at all, “Well, I suppose.” *Don’t go getting bashful on me!* I thought.

“Anyway,” I said, “this whole wife and marriage thing is laying it on a bit thick. You don’t have to go that far. We’re only doing this for two weeks.”

“Oh?” she said. “Are you really so promiscuous that you’re afraid of monogamy?”

“Gah! That’s not what I meant!”

Her eyebrows furrowed in distaste. That hurt!

“You can do as you please,” she said, “but I will follow my own moral code.”

“Yet your goal is to hurt Mai,” I said.

“That’s part of my moral code.”

Right, I thought. *Got it.*

“Well, I guess I can swing it if it’s only for two weeks…” I said.

“Right,” she agreed. “A pleasure working with you, partner.”

This “partner” had a bit of a different nuance to it, right? Like the husband-and-wife kind of “partner,” you know? But maybe I was only imagining things.

“You know, Satsuki-san,” I said. “I feel you’d make a surprisingly good wife.”

“Do you think so? I’m not so sure. You seem like the type who’d prefer a wife who’s better in bed.”

“You are wrong!” I insisted. “So wrong!” *Stop treating me like my mind’s permanently in the gutter!* I thought. How had she even ended up with that image of me?

Just as I was shutting down the conversation—it was probably tarnishing all of Satsuki-san’s nice memories of the shrine—and making to go, she reached out her hand towards me. I took it, thinking she wanted to shake like this was a business deal.

“No,” she said. “Since we’re going to be dating for the time

being… Here, how about we try this?"

Her fingers intertwined with mine. Her hands felt nice and cold against my palm. And now we were holding hands, just like girlfriends.

"Oh!"

"I prefer not to do anything by halves," she explained.

"Oh, um, but. Well." She'd told me that we weren't friends, and yet now she was suddenly acting so close. Talk about running hot and cold.

Satsuki-san's face was red as a strawberry as she stood next to me. "Well, you don't mind, do you?" she insisted, her lips curled in a pout. "Besides, it can hardly be called dating if we don't at least hold hands."

She looked just like a little girl who'd borrowed her mom's lipstick. This was the first time I'd looked at Satsuki-san and didn't think she was scary or beautiful. For some reason, I couldn't help but think she looked…cute.

Even holding hands with her felt vastly different from doing the same with Mai. She was a different girl. Then it hit me like a sack of bricks that I was holding hands with a different girl. My heart went nuts.

"U-uh, say, Satsuki-san," I mumbled. "I think holding hands might be a bit, uh, much."

Noticing my apprehension, Satsuki-san whipped her phone out of her bag and grinned at me. "Let's take a photo as proof that we've held hands."

"Huh?"

"Oh, and how about you post it on Instagram? That's what they call 'dropping hints,' right?" Satsuki-san cackled. "Oh, what fun. I can just picture her in anguish already!"

"But then everyone in the group will know!" I protested. "If that happens, I'm filing for divorce immediately. You hear me? Divorce!"

Cute? Yeah, as if! She was an evil witch scheming to assassinate the princess!

Now I had two whole weeks of this ahead of me. This could not end well. I shuddered.

At any rate, we started being girlfriends. Of course, even at school, that didn't mean we had to be attached at the hip 24/7 or whatever. In fact, everything was pretty much the same as usual. It wasn't like we were making kissy noises at each other over lingering post-school day phone calls. Heck, we didn't so much as text. Actually, what the hell was going on? Was this love? Okay, that was the one thing it absolutely couldn't be. We had zero alone time together apart from the walks home from school. Nothing else. Talk about being chaste.

Speaking of walking home after school, it turned out Kaho-chan had done a good job explaining that one incident to the other two. I guess she wasn't wrong after all. This really had turned out to be part of the plan to get Mai and Satsuki-san to make up, hadn't it?

At any rate, Satsuki-san and I walked home together this afternoon. Well, only to the station, but we carried on a surprisingly active conversation the whole way. (I swear.)

"Amaori," she asked, "what are your hobbies?"

"Huh, uh, me? Mine?" There I went answering with a question. *Who else would she be asking about?* I reminded myself.

"I was thinking that I should learn more about you for the time being," she explained.

My hobbies, huh? I thought. Well, there were video games, watching gaming videos, wasting my time online, anime, and other stuff like that… But if I said any one of those to her, she'd cringe. Like, "Those are all completely brain rotting. All too appropriate for Amaori," I just knew it. I couldn't get the words out.

But then again, maybe Satsuki-san was a huge gamer at home. Maybe she'd go, "Oh yes, I enjoy games as well. I have twenty thousand hours logged in *Monster Hunter*." I had a sliver of hope!

"U-uh, well, if you must know," I said. "I guess, you know. Games and stuff."

"Games? Like *Life*, the board game? You play that alone?"

Nope, no two ways about it, if that's what she came up with, then she wasn't a gamer!

"U-um, well, I guess you're not too far off."

"Amaori."

Her voice was perfectly level, but it made me nervous.

"Why are you lying to me?" she asked.

"Eep!"

The witch's eyes, capable of reading people's minds, looked into mine and exposed all my weaknesses to broad daylight.

"I asked you a question in order to get to know you better, but that point is moot if you try to trick me. Give me a real answer."

Sobbing, I blubbered, “I’m so sorry.”

“H-hey now.”

No matter what I tried, I couldn’t stop the tears coursing down my cheeks. Her logic was just so strong that it knocked my mental HP down to 0.

“The truth is, I’m a gamer, officer,” I confessed. “I play those barbaric video games where you get big ol’ guns and blow people to smithereens.”

See, Satsuki-san? I’m the worst… I could just feel her looking at me like I was a piece of trash. I could practically hear her saying, “I see. Because everything goes wrong for you in real life, you play video games to vent your frustration. You’ve let games rot your brain, in other words. How pitiful.” She’d spout all the biased views of those adults on daytime talk shows.

Except she actually went, “Oh. You’re talking about FPS games?”

“Wait, you know what I’m talking about? You? Satsuki-san?!” I cried.

“Do I detect an insult?” she asked.

“No, don’t be ridiculous! I mean, you just seem so, like, clean and upstanding! Games are for delinquents and dropouts, and playing them rots your brain!”

“It’s rare to meet someone with such a stereotypical impression of video games in this day and age,” she said. “At any rate, my mother plays them periodically, and I watch her.”

“Wait, your mother plays them?”

That was way too unbelievable. No way could I picture Satsuki’s mom as a gamer.

“What, you think she’s the kind of mom who wears pointy glasses and every other sentence out of her mouth is ‘go study’?” Satsuki-san asked.

“You’re reading my mind!”

“I most certainly am not.” She looked at me and smiled. “But I know what you mean. People often assume that about her, but she’s actually completely different. Mind you, you’ll never have the chance to find out how.”

“Uh, yeah, okay,” I said.

What on earth was up with that smile? It pushed me away as forcefully as a slap from a giant sumo wrestler.

“Are FPS games fun?” she asked.

“Huh? Oh, uh, I dunno! I guess some people like them, and some people don’t.”

“Yes, but what does that have to do with anything? I’m talking to you, so I want to hear your opinion. Not anyone else’s.”

“W-well, I guess that’s true,” I admitted. “Then, um… I l-like them, yeah. When I’m gaming, I don’t have to think about anything else.”

Satsuki-san giggled. “I know the feeling. Whenever I find a good book, I completely lose track of the time. I get so absorbed in it I forget to eat or sleep.”

“Wow,” I said. “Hey, what kind of books do you like anyway?”

“I’ll read almost anything, but I think my favorite genres are stories about people.”

People? I thought.

I wasn’t really sure what she was getting at, but Satsuki-san didn’t sigh at my ineptitude or anything. Instead, she explained quite casually, “I mean stories about emotions, perhaps—such as the true nature of a person’s character when driven to the brink, or their frantic struggles to overcome even the most desperate situations. I particularly enjoy stories that bare the human heart like that.”

“That makes sense,” I said. “I like books like that too.”

“…Really, now?”

“Yes, I’m telling the truth this time!”

As my voice rose into a shriek, Satsuki-san’s composed expression quirked into a smile. “Yes, I know,” she said. “I was teasing you.”

“Y-you’re so mean!”

“Why are you so worked up right now?” she asked.

“Well…” I lowered my eyes. “Satsuki-san, I just don’t want you to start disliking me.”

I stole a peek at her face and saw her eyes widen slightly in

surprise. I always tried to act cool to hide my weak points and push myself past my limits. In truth, I was a lame mess, and I knew for sure that anyone would dislike me once they found out.

But, just as if she knew all of my flaws already, Satsuki-san said, “I won’t start disliking you.”

“Huh?”

It sounded like she’d really meant it, even inadvertently.

She tucked her hair behind her ear and grinned. “After all,” she added, “I never liked you all that much to begin with.”

“Hey, hey, hey now!”

Just when I thought she was playing nice, she’d gone and turned the tables on me. Trying to get a handle on her was like playing a game where the devs kept buffing and nerfing the balance.

We arrived at the station. Satsuki-san and I lived in opposite directions, so once we passed the ticket gate, I was about to head off to a different platform when she said, “Hey, Amaori,” and stopped me in my tracks.

“Y-yeah?” I asked. I turned, bracing myself for whatever cruel thing she would say this time.

But she didn’t say anything cruel at all. Instead, she said, “I have this book that I’ve finished reading. Would you…like to borrow it?”

“Huh? Yeah, of course!”

“You don’t have to if you don’t wa—wait, that was fast.”

“I’d love to know about the books you’re always reading, Satsuki-san,” I insisted.

“…Okay,” she said. She pulled a paperback book wrapped in a monotone cloth cover from out of her bag and handed it to me. “You can give it back to me whenever you want. I think you’ll like it, but if it bores you, there’s no need to read the whole thing.”

“Thanks!” I said.

Sure, I’d partially said it since it gave me more things to talk about with Satsuki-san, but I really did like reading quite a bit. Back in my loner days, my two best friends were the school infirmary and the

library.

Satsuki-san, for some odd reason, fidgeted. “I haven’t recommended my favorite books to other people all that often, but I thought I should at least make this effort and meet you halfway.”

Wait, was it just me, or was this Satsuki-san’s way of being affectionate? Suddenly reminded of yesterday’s arranged marriage declaration, my cheeks turned red. I knew I was late to get the memo, but it was finally sinking in that Satsuki-san and I were legit dating. The whole lending books back and forth thing? It was really, you know. Wow. This was actually real.

“You know, when I see you, I’m reminded of something all over again,” she said.

Huh? My heart skipped a beat. W-wait, I reminded her of what, exactly?

Satsuki-san smiled at me, all prim and proper. “We’ve gone all the way to dating, but you still keep trying to trick me, act like you’re better than you really are, and keep me at arm’s length. Thank you for being the perfect example of what not to do.”

Clutching her book, I yelled back at her in utter despair, “Any time!”

I got a seat on the train ride home, so I cracked open the book first thing. Ah, that familiar feel of a cloth-covered book in my hands. You know, I almost thought I could feel some of Satsuki-san’s warmth still on the pages. Unconsciously, I raised the book to my face to get a whiff of her smell. Then I suddenly came to my senses. What the hell was I doing? Time out, me, time out! No more of that. Time for me to buckle down and read.

Light novels were more my speed, but this book looked more like high literature. *Hmm, if it’s too complicated, this might be challenging for me to get through*, I thought.

But the style was actually pretty easy to get into. Yeah, it looked a lot simpler than I’d expected. The story followed a twenty-seven-year-old office lady as its protagonist. Uh-huh, uh-huh. Tell me more. Interesting!

And then, right from page three, the book devolved into one

steamy sex scene after another between the protagonist and a random high school girl who happened to pass by, all written in painstaking, sticky detail.

I slammed the book shut with my face on fire. The people near me on the train gave me quizzical looks. Koto Satsuki, Koto Satsuki… Trembling, I screamed internally, *What do you mean you think I'd like it?!*

ANYWAY.

I showed up at school the next day, ready to give Satsuki-san a piece of my mind, only to be greeted first thing in the morning with Mai's sunny hello. The seeds of guilt sprouted instinctively.

"H-hey there," I said.

My instincts were telling me to flee, so I beelined straight for my seat. I thought I heard Mai make a judgmental "Hmm," but I couldn't be sure. *Oh god*, I thought once again. *I'm in deep trouble.* All because I'd gotten swept up in Satsuki-san's business and started dating her.

In the midst of duking it out with Mai on whether to be best friends or girlfriends, I'd up and agreed to date Satsuki-san for two weeks like it was nothing. Was that dishonorable of me? Or just disgusting? At the very least, there had to be a discrepancy in my emotional reasoning…

Regardless, if the end justified the means, then I was doing this so Mai and Satsuki-san would be friends again. So it was for Mai's own good! That meant I wasn't betraying my friend's feelings! Yeah! Probably not!

God, relationships were so hard to figure out.

Okay, well, at any rate, they'd be friends again after two weeks. I could wait out the awkwardness of school so long as I saw the end in sight. Yeah. Yeah!

A pity that my optimism didn't last past the morning.

Over lunch, Mai came up to me and asked, "Do you have a moment, Renako?"

"Huh? Eep!"

Wh-what was with this girl? What kind of divine intuition did she have?

We stepped out into the hall and walked side by side. Mai's hair was up in a ponytail, meaning that we were best friends today. Well, that was some comfort, at least.

"Wanna, uh, go up to the roof?" I asked.

"No thank you," she said. "My skin is sensitive to UV rays, so I'd rather not be on the rooftop in this weather. But you're right; we have made many good memories there. If you're set on going, I'll bring a parasol."

"That would totally get everyone's attention," I told her. "So where do you want to go? An empty classroom?"

"Somewhere quiet."

Sure, but the school didn't have a lot of places for Oduka Mai to carry on a private conversation. Maybe if it were after school, sure, but we were in the middle of lunch break. Even now, people were saying hi to Mai nonstop as we passed them. Mai had to be aware of how much she stood out, right? I mean, she had to be, right? Oh great, now I was getting worried. She wasn't about to declare her love for me over the whole PA system or something, right? The party experience was bad enough, but if she said that here, the whole school would shun me.

Mai changed into her outdoor shoes at the entrance and stepped through the front doors. Maybe she wanted to go back behind the school to find some shady area?

Nope. She set off straight for the gates. Okay, that made sense. If we went off campus and stood around somewhere, at least we wouldn't have to worry about other kids seeing us.

Nope again. There was a huge freaking limo parked in front of the school gates.

Hello? …Hello?!

A woman in a suit—probably the driver—stepped out and opened the door to the back seat. Mai took my hand and guided me inside. "Join me, darling," she said.

Inside was an enormous space kitted out with a table that looked like you could play billiards on it. The air conditioning was revving at full blast. Imported liquors lined the walls. Oh my god. This was like a world from a movie! The seats were so soft that I thought I was about to be swallowed up by them.

Mai sat across from me and folded her long legs. She looked horribly dignified.

"No one can hear us here," she said. "Now we can talk to our hearts' content."

"I mean, yeah, but…um, hello?! You can give me that smug, 'Great idea, no?' face all you want, but that doesn't change the fact that this isn't a victory of your creative powers! This is due to your financial powers!"

"Well, so long as it's a victory, who cares?" she said. "Now, can I get you something to drink? Scotch? Bourbon? Or I could mix you up a cocktail."

"Apparently Japanese laws are different from Oduka laws! What kind of high schooler has cocktails at lunch and then nips back to class, huh?"

"Why, it'll just be another one of our precious little secrets," Mai promised.

"This is just peer pressure to drink!" I snapped. "I never thought I'd get that from my classmates."

As Mai and I argued, the driver poured me a glass of Perrier. Oh, thank god. Just a normal fancy drink.

But no, I wasn't out of the woods yet. We still hadn't even gotten into the real reason we needed to talk. She was going to bring up Satsuki-san for sure. Okay, I needed to explain to Mai exactly what was going on. No hesitation, just straight out.

Mai smiled at me and remarked, "You and Satsuki have been rather close recently. How long have you two been such good friends?"

"Uh, well, uh, th-that's a good question!"

My mind suddenly went blank. Now that we were actually getting down to it, I was too weak!

"Well, um, let's see," I said. "It was kinda. Uh. I guess you could say two days ago. I was just, uh, thinking I'd like to get to know her better. That kind of thing!"

I scratched the back of my head and laughed self-consciously.

"Well, but, uh…" I continued.

“Hmm?” Mai tilted her head.

I groaned and looked down into my lap. “I’m sorry,” I told her.

“Whatever for? Did you do something that deserves an apology, Renako?”

“No, but… I just kinda feel like I should…” I groaned in agony. “Hey, Mai. We’re friends, right?”

“I believe at present we decided to settle for being friends with Rena-fits.”

I gestured like I was dribbling an imaginary basketball as I explained, “So, it turns out that when you get to know more people, you sometimes end up running into situations where two different people you know want conflicting things from me… Mai, what am I supposed to do when that happens?”

Mai gave me a wry grin. “So now we’ve flipped the script, and you’re the one coming to me for help, hm?”

Was I? Yeah, I guess you could call it that.

“I know what you mean, Renako,” she went on.

Honestly, looking at her now, I had to admit that she felt pretty darn dependable. But was she really? *You’re not being tricked by her beauty, are you, brain?* I asked myself.

“Satsuki is plotting to do something cruel to me, isn’t she?” Mai asked. “And you’ve agreed to help her, but somewhere deep down you feel guilty for my sake. Am I correct?”

“Huh?” I said. “How’d you know?”

“How do you think? Because I’m Oduka Mai.”

With the charisma of a princess adored by her subjects, Mai summed up all my distress at once.

“God,” I said. “I have such a cool friend.”

It took self-restraint to keep from making heart eyes at this best friend version of Mai.

“And you feel guilty because you love me dearly,” she concluded.

“No, you’re wrong about that.”

I shut her down in less than a second, but Mai didn’t particularly

care. “I know,” she said. “Your love for your friends makes you a beautiful person, which is how you always end up trapped in these difficult situations. But that’s all part of your charm, you know. That’s why I’ll never stop you from doing what you want. I don’t care whom you associate with, so long as you always come back to me in the end.”

Who was this girl—a freaking empress?

“If anything,” Mai went on, “I’m glad to hear that you and Satsuki are becoming friends. Satsuki is nicer than she looks, and I’m sure you two must be getting along famously.”

I could hardly believe that Mai would say such things about Satsuki-san. With her hair done up all fancy like this, Mai looked way more mature than normal. This was the supadari of Ashigaya High…the sun goddess who’d shot Cupid’s arrows through all our hearts.

“Um,” I said. “You and Satsuki-san met each other before high school, right?”

“Yes, we did. I’ve known her since the spring of fifth grade.”

“Wow, so you knew each other during elementary school?” That made these two childhood friends. Wait, but at the same time, I couldn’t quite wrap my head around it. “You’re telling me you guys were kids once?”

“Well, we certainly didn’t appear out of thin air fully formed, did we? At any rate, I’m glad you and I met in high school. I used to be such a stupid little girl.”

“For real?”

Mai put her hand to her mouth, looking chagrined. “Yes,” she admitted. “I was such a spoiled little rich girl, ignorant to the ways of the world and feeling entitled to everyone’s attention. I didn’t even have any idea how privileged I was. I was nothing but a naive, arrogant child.”

Wait, and that was different how…? Naturally, I didn’t have the heart to actually say that to her.

“Satsuki is one of the few people who’s known me since then. To be honest, sometimes I feel embarrassed about that… Oh, I’ve mentioned to you before that you’re my girl of destiny, haven’t I?”

“Huh? Yeah.”

That topic change came out of nowhere.

“Nothing can change the fact of our meeting. I feel similarly about Satsuki. She’s been there for me and has for a long time. Nothing can replace all the time I spent with her.”

“…Yeah, I guess that makes sense.”

By junior high, I’d pretty much lost contact with all my old friends. But just the same, I got where Mai was coming from. Even through my whole introverted loser phase and my truant phase, my little sister was always there for me, spouting insults all the while. She’d been a pain in my butt more times than I could count, but maybe the positives still won out in the end. Even so, I didn’t think I could be straight with her and tell her, “You know, you’re not so bad after all,” like Mai did. I guess Mai really was mature.

“You like Satsuki-san a lot, don’t you?” I asked.

They weren’t just ordinary friends. They had to be Special friends with a capital S.

Mai chuckled. “I don’t know about that,” she said. “She and I barely talk anymore.”

“Y-yeah, that’s it! That’s my point!” I pointed at her with more force than was strictly necessary. “Since you care for her so much, can’t you two make up already?”

“I don’t think I’d call it making up,” she said. “I’m not exactly trying to feud with her to begin with.”

“Huh?” I squeaked.

Mai shrugged. “Satsuki’s stubborn. She won’t adapt to change. Once she’s decided something has to be a certain way, she’ll dig in her heels. I suppose it’s best if you play along and let her do what she wants.”

She smiled at me like this didn’t bother her. But what a bombshell of a statement to drop.

“A-are you sure?” I asked. “Are you sure you don’t mind?”

“Granted, I’m a bit peeved she’s robbing me of precious time with you. But if that’s all she’s doing, it isn’t the end of the world. You want to go along with her too, don’t you? In that case, I’ll respect your feelings. Please take care of Satsuki for me.”

I just had to check once again that she really meant all this—this magnanimity of an empress that she was showing me.

“Are you sure sure? Are you absolutely positive you don’t mind letting her have her way?”

“Yes, isn’t that what I said? We’ve decided that we have until graduation to go slow and take our relationship to the next level. These occasional small detours are essential in life, you know. And after all, no matter what route you take, we have to wait until we’re eighteen to marry.”

Maybe Mai was just putting up a strong front so she could try to make up for all the hassle she’d caused me earlier.

“Okay…” I said. “I guess so.”

Internally, I was super grateful to Mai. If I was stuck between a rock and a hard place, this at least gave me a little breathing room. I wasn’t actually sure she had a clue what she was letting us do, but all the same… *Thanks, Mai*, I thought.

Mai exhaled in satisfaction. As the light reflected off the glass of Perrier, her expression darkened ever so slightly. “Alas, had I known I would be spending such quality time with you here today, I would have worn my hair down.”

“B-but I’m glad you didn’t,” I protested. “I was able to come to you for advice exactly because you were my friend.”

“Really, now? Well, I am glad to hear that.” She gave me a gentle smile. “But just for your information, I could be four times as nice as your girlfriend. Why don’t I solve all your problems for you two times over?”

“Don’t offer that! You gotta let me work on my growth a little! Don’t nip this effort in the bud!”

Mai’s affection really was too sweet to stomach. I only wanted one sugar cube’s worth, thank you very much. Being friends was just right.

“Ready to go home, Amaori?” Satsuki-san suggested.

“S-sure,” I said.

But even with what I’d just cleared with Mai, I couldn’t leave class all chummy with Satsuki-san right in front of her! All this rapid mental

flip-flopping was too much for me.

As I walked out of the classroom at Satsuki-san's heels, I caught Mai's eye and gave her a timid wave.

"Um. See you tomorrow, Oduka-san," I called.

"Take care on the way home, and see you tomorrow."

Mai was smiling at me as brightly as a star when a certain wicked woman stepped in front of me and cut off my view. "Are you coming? Hurry up, partner."

"Hey, no—" Satsuki-san was playing with fire here with the whole nuance of this "partner" thing. Sure, no one else seemed to notice, but come on, Satsuki-san! This was dropping too many hints!

Mai didn't say a word, just kept on smiling like she was made of ceramic. But I could just feel her cheek twitching!

Urgh, my body was being used as a political battleground…

As soon as we stepped out into the hallway, I unabashedly drooped. "Hey, Satsuki-san, you're being kind of pushy…"

"Don't you remember what I said yesterday? You're about to get lucky."

Uh, hello?!

Satsuki-san side-eyed me and grinned at the shock on my face. "So, come on," she said.

"Uh, to wh-where, exactly…?"

"Where do you think? Somewhere with a desk that we are about to put to very good use."

She pulled me by the hand, leading me off to whatever place she'd kept up her sleeve for this moment. Eep! Come on, we were still minors!

Oh… Here it was, her secret place…

She'd brought me to a rather old room, a quiet, dimly lit room with a faint feel of mystery. It wasn't the most hip and happening place, although it certainly was cool in the temperature sense of the word.

"Wait," I cried, "this is just a library!"

"Yes," Satsuki-san said. "Your point being?"

“Thank god the A/C works. It’s so cool in here!”

“Yes, thank goodness. Now quiet down, please.”

Yes, ma’am.

This was a public ward library a bit of a distance from the school. Satsuki-san and I took seats next to each other in the study area. Apparently, I learned, this was where Satsuki-san got those books she went around reading all the time.

“By the way,” I said, “what was all that about me, uh, getting lucky?”

“I meant that I’ll help you study, of course.”

“Ah.”

Satsuki-san looked back at me in bewilderment. “Why on earth are you hiding your face in your hands? I sincerely doubt my offer made you so happy you could cry.”

“No, I’m just feeling…depraved, I guess you could say.”

Why on earth had I been entertaining such steamy fantasies all the way here? I should have known full well that Satsuki-san would never be like that.

“Good for you,” she said. “Either way, midterms are next week. How much are you studying each day?”

Bold of her to assume I studied.

“L-like thirty minutes, I guess?” Yeah, I had days where I did that much…in theory. On days when I had a lot of homework and stuff. I mean, we did plenty of studying at school, so what was the point in coming home and studying more?

Satsuki-san furrowed her eyebrows. “And that allows you to maintain your grades? What did you score on your last exams?”

Uh… When I admitted where I’d placed, Satsuki-san heaved a deep sigh. Ouch! That hurt!

“I don’t want to waste my time with low-achievers,” she informed me.

“And that hurts even more… Urgh, I mean, I think I’m just a bit below average is all…” And besides, Ashigaya High was kind of out of the way and required kids to work super hard to get in, so the bar was

already high.

"If you're going to date me, at the very least you'll need to score in the top ten of our class. Or else we're going to have a problem."

"The top ten?" I cried. "There's, like, three people in the world who can pull that off!"

"There's ten." She looked at me like I was an idiot. "It goes without saying that Oduka Mai places number one in our grade, but Sena is right up there as well. Even Kaho makes the top ten."

"Really?" Oh, damn. That was a shocker. Ajisai-san was one thing, but I'd always assumed that Kaho-chan was on my level.

These girls really were the cream of the high-achieving crop. They were all the top elite, a species that could talk to Oduka Mai. Not like me, Amaori Renako, an average Joe from birth.

I slumped over, depressed, and Satsuki-san shot me a glance. My heart skipped a beat when her attention suddenly turned my way. She apparently knew that other people thought she was beautiful, but she didn't seem to care at all what effect her good looks had on us. In my book, that made her no different than Mai!

"It doesn't make a bit of difference to me either way," she continued, "but Amaori, you think everyone else is better than you, don't you? If you have an opportunity to work hard and close the gap, I think you'd be better off putting in the effort."

"Urgh…"

Once again, there she went making a good argument.

"Maybe the top ten is pushing it a bit," she conceded. "I certainly don't need extra competition for the top spot if I can help it. Still, don't you think it's fun to watch your hard work pay off when you get better grades?"

"I mean, I guess."

That's how I felt about multiplayer games. I liked beating my opponent, sure, but what I loved more than anything was the feeling of improvement. The joy of victory was fleeting and would only be struck down by the frustration of defeat, but compared to that, the feeling of getting better stuck with me forever, and kept getting bigger and bigger. Come to think of it, that's how I'd felt about all my smiling and make-up practice back at the beginning of high school. It'd made me start to

feel like I really was cut out for living on the straight and narrow.

Well, I guess I'd better study, then.

"I suppose it'll make my mom happy if I bring my grades up," I admitted.

"That's the spirit."

"Uh-huh…"

"Now let's get started," she said. "Open up your textbook."

"Yes, ma'am."

Then we began our study session. At least compared to a whole HIDDEN CAMERA!! You Won't Believe What Happens Next! BBQ Party with Pretty Girls!!! thing, there was way less of the "No freaking way, I'm going to die!" factor.

"Hey, Satsuki-san, can I ask you about this?" I said.

"Which one? Oh, I see. That one's pretty tricky, isn't it? Why don't you try thinking about it like this?"

You know, as surprising as it was, Satsuki-san turned out to be a pretty darn good teacher. Whenever I didn't get something, she first checked to see what I wasn't understanding and then led me step-by-step through the problem. She never got mad or impatient with me. She just kept pace with me and offered logical, patient explanations until the end.

"Satsuki-san, you'd make a good wife who'd force her good-for-nothing husband to get ahead in life," I told her. "You're usually so distant, but you're really nice when you're teaching me. Are you, like, playing good cop/bad cop by yourself?"

"I'm not trying to," she said. "But what's the point in being strict when you're learning? I mean, unless you subscribe to the theory that people learn by being told off, but that's another story."

Nope, I was totally fine with this current teaching method.

"You know, Satsuki-san," I said, "I honestly think you're the kind of person who'd be like, 'Well, I have no other choice' and light yourself on fire for the person you're dating. You're kind of a caretaker in relationships, aren't you?"

"I wouldn't know. I've never dated anyone before." She frowned, her eyebrows furrowing and cheeks turning red. "It's kind of

embarrassing when you look at me that way."

"Huh? Oh, uh, no, sorry. I wasn't thinking of you, like, romantically or anything. I was talking about a hypothetical scenario, you know? I just think that you'll make whoever you end up dating really happy."

"…Well, right now I'm dating you, aren't I?"

"W-well, yeah," I admitted.

Seeing Satsuki-san this flustered rattled me too. What was going on? Why did I feel so weird?

I waved my hands back and forth to hide how red my own face was getting. "L-look, I just mean, like, if it was Mai teaching me or something, she'd just give me a look like, 'I can't comprehend how you don't get this.'"

"Comparing me with her is tantamount to committing an act of violence on my mental well-being. From now on, can you exercise a bit more caution before speaking?"

"Got it."

I zipped my lips.

Satsuki-san and I went back to studying. "Here," she said. "Look at this part."

The way her pale fingertip traced the problem on the page felt oddly sensual, and a weird sound welled up in my throat. I called out to the mini-Mai in my head, begging her to stifle these feelings. But she just looked back at me with a complacent grin and said, "Oh, don't worry about me." Great, she was no help at all!

"I didn't used to be able to do this either," Satsuki-san said, cutting through the midst of my mental havoc with a non sequitur.

"Huh?"

"I couldn't get the hang of it for the longest time. Maybe I still can't. I wasn't always able to study. It wasn't the slightest bit of fun for me, and I kept having to go over the same parts over and over again."

Satsuki-san had had a phase like that too?

"But you still kept going?" I asked.

"I lost my temper is why." Satsuki-san giggled. "I was so

frustrated. No one could beat Mai in anything. Not academics. Not athletics. Everyone kept showering her in praise and saying it was because she was so special, but she wasn't. She just worked very hard. I knew that she was just as human as anyone else, which meant that, eventually, I could win. And so, I kept on challenging her."

She smiled, but she wasn't mocking herself. It was a really pretty smile, the kind you'd imagine in the sepia tone of an old, pleasant memory. I could just faintly see how both she and Mai had become the people they were today. Sure, maybe they didn't talk at school right now, but Mai and Satsuki-san were very good friends. Maybe there had been no reason to worry about them in the first place.

I started to feel relieved and tried to make a joke out of it. "That makes sense. You think that if I work hard too, I can make second place in our grade?"

"You'd have to work very hard."

She grinned at me, and her smile told me she'd once been in my shoes. I was a simple woman, so I felt tempted to go along with my wonderful wife's words of wisdom.

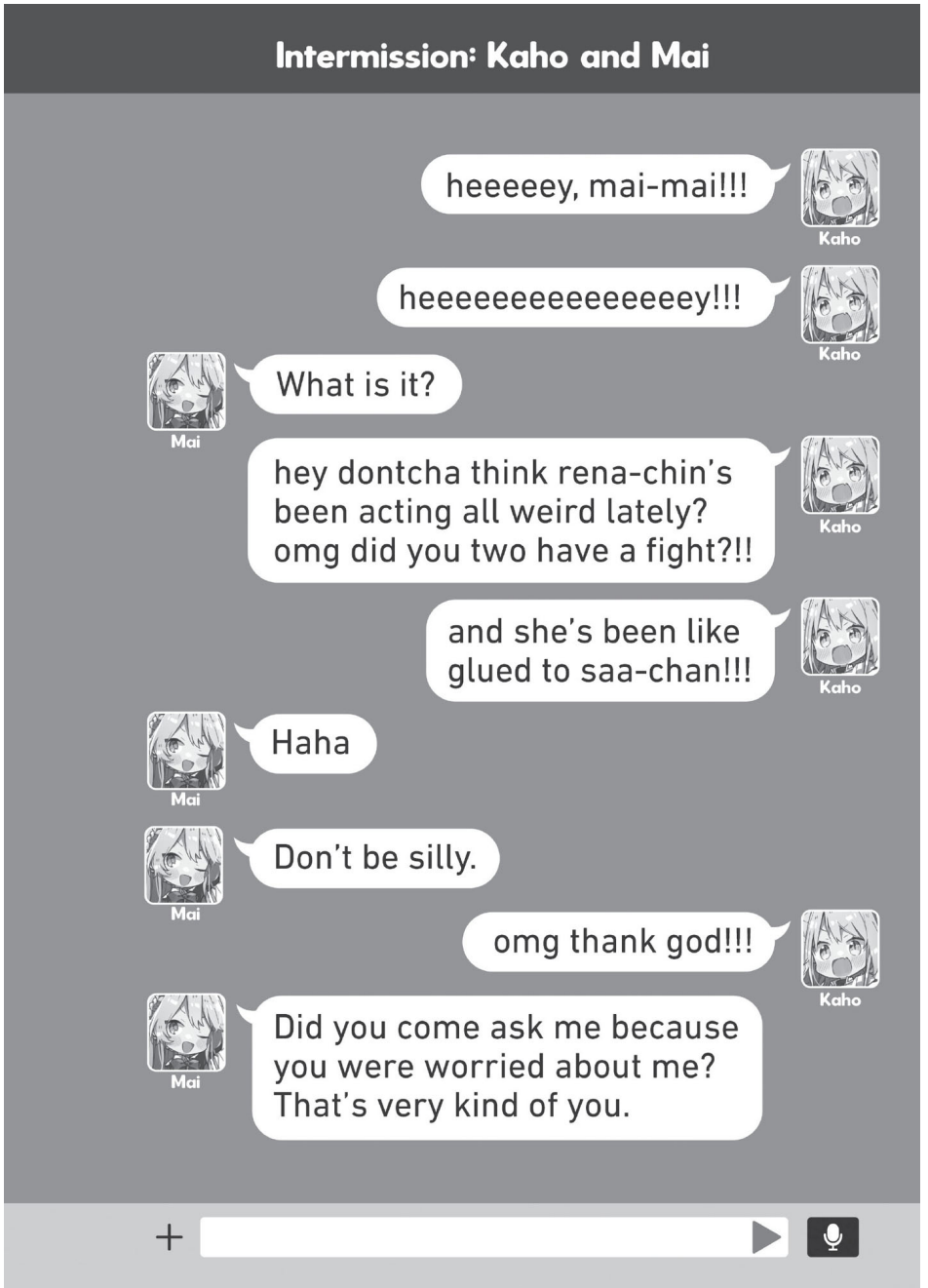
"Then I guess I'd better put my nose to the grindstone," I said.

"Oh, my apologies. Let me take that back." She grinned again. "You'd have to abandon everything else and work yourself to death to make that happen."

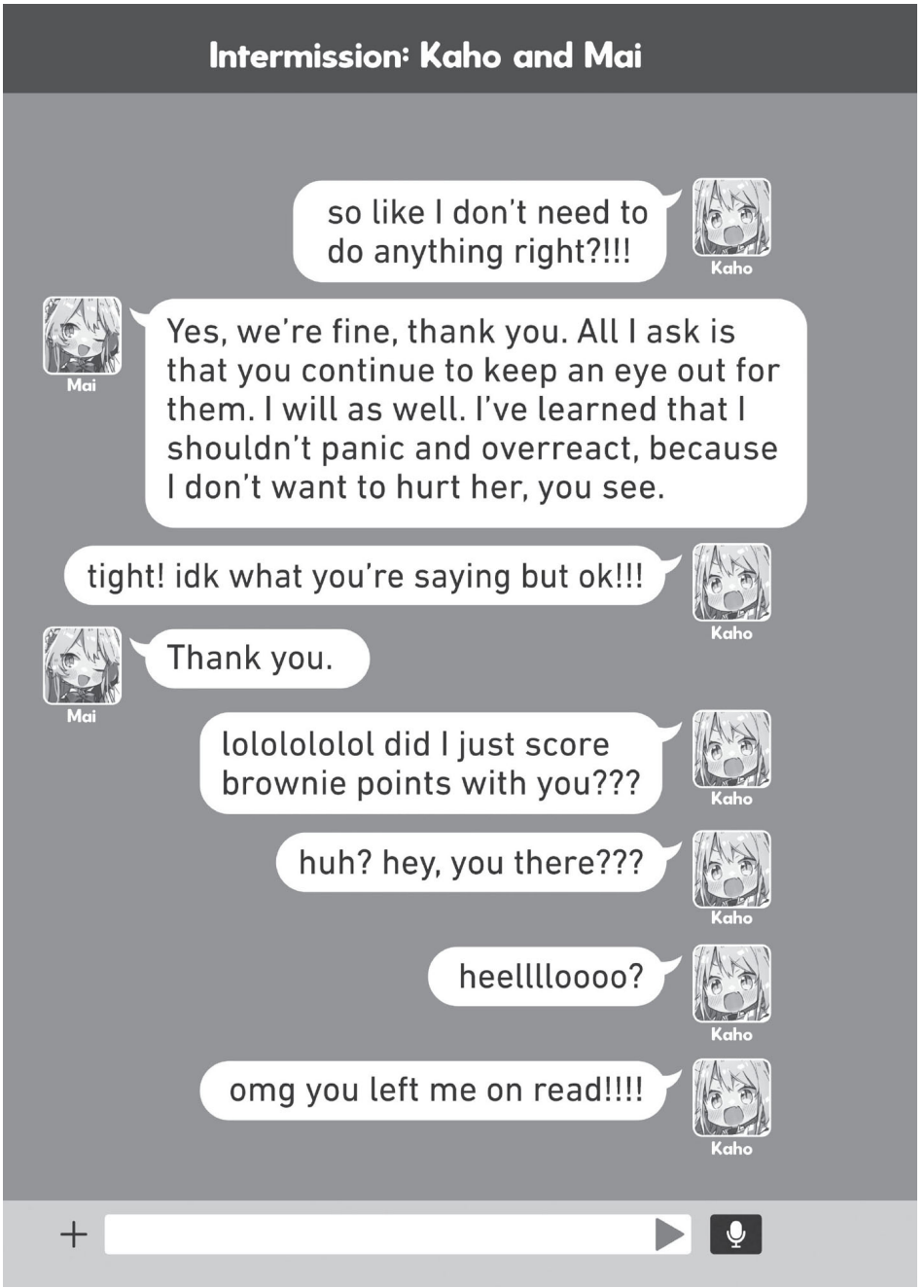
"I'd rather not!"

I discovered a whole new side of Satsuki-san that day, but never in my wildest dreams did I imagine I was about to discover another, even wilder side.

Intermission: Kaho and Mai



Intermission: Kaho and Mai



Kaho: heeeeey, mai-mai!!!

Kaho: heeeeeeeeeeeeeey!!!

Mei: What is it?

Kaho: hey dontcha think rena-chin's been acting all weird lately? omg did you two have a fight?!!

Kaho: and she's been like glued to saa-chan!!!

Mei: Haha

Mei: Don't be silly.

Kaho: omg thank god!!!

Kaho: Did you come ask me because you were worried about me? That's very kind of you.

Kaho: so like I don't need to do anything right?!!!

Mei: Yes, we're fine, thank you. All I ask is that you continue to keep an eye out for them. I will as well. I've learned that I shouldn't panic and overreact, because I don't want to hurt her, you see.

Kaho: tight! Idk what you're saying but ok!!!

Mei: Thank you.

Kaho: lolololololol did I just score brownie points with you???

Kaho: huh? hey, you there???

Kaho: heellllloooo?

Kaho: omg you left me on read!!!!!

Chapter 2:
We Have Too Many Secrets! No More! No Freaking Way!

EVERYONE HAS SOME KIND of weak point they don't want anyone else to know about, no matter what. For instance, I had my hidden past as an emo loser. All the girls in my friend group were good people, so I figured they wouldn't make fun of me even if they did find out. But still. It would have put them way, way too out of my league. It'd be even harder to hang out with them while acting like nothing was wrong. So I planned on taking that secret to the grave.

However, actually hiding the secret was difficult. For as long as I lived, there'd always be the risk of someone popping up who knew me from before. You could never really get rid of the past, you know? And that's how this whole next debacle started.

"Hey, Oneechan," said my sister one evening after I came home from school. "Are Mai-senpai or Ajisai-senpai coming over to hang out again?"

I looked up from where I lay flopped on the sofa, screwing around with a handheld game. "Huh? Who said they'd be coming over so often?"

"Is everything okay, Oneechan?"

"Yeah? Why're you asking?"

"It's just that… I don't know, it feels kind of like that was their way of making fun of the weirdo, you know?"

"Um, no?!" I yelled. What on earth was she going on about?!

I lurched upright, but my sister only stared back at me coolly. "I mean, the more I think about, the weirder it gets that my loser older sister and Mai-senpai would be, you know. Dating and getting married and all," my sister said. "I guess it must have been a dream."

"No, it wasn't!" I snapped. "It really happened! Well, not the marriage part, but the rest!"

My parents were going to come home late, so I had no problem with talking about the whole Mai thing out in the open of the living room.

“Now you listen!” I continued. “Don’t breathe a word of this to Mom or Dad, okay? And don’t you dare tell anyone from school that I’m such a recluse!”

“Yeah, duh, I know.”

My sister squeezed my thighs. *Stop!* I thought. *Just because you’re the fit and sporty type doesn’t give you the right!*

“I’m not such a loser that I’d be jealous of you finally getting to enjoy your youth,” she said.

“Listen here, you little—!”

Was this how Mai and Satsuki-san thought about each other? Yup, like hell would I ever open up to my sister about my gratitude to her.

After riling me up (maybe this was all according to plan?), my sister put her hands behind her head. “Y’know,” she said. “while we’re on the subject, I’ve been in a real donut mood lately. Hey, let’s go get donuts! There’s this one shop I’d love to try.”

“Come on,” I groaned, “that sounds like a hassle. Can’t you just run down to the convenience store and get some?”

My sister took the 2000 yen bill Mom left us for getting dinner and waggled it between her fingers.

“If we don’t get donuts, who knows what might come out of my mouth?” she taunted. “Emo weirdo!”

“I’m literally going to kill you!”

The donut shop she wanted to go to was no less than four train stops away. *It might not be long*, I thought, *before I start plotting the perfect crime*.

I changed into a good T-shirt and went with my sister to Queen Donut.

“Yay, thanks, Oneechan!” she said. “I love you.”

“Yeah, yeah, whatever,” I muttered.

Yet all the same, I was fighting a losing battle. I had a hankering for donuts too.

Queen Donut was a fast-food joint that’d been opening up new locations like crazy these past couple of years. They sold more than just

sweet donuts; they had a bunch of donuts with savory fillings and other stuff too. I guess it was basically like a bakery? At any rate, people said all their things were great.

Also, the uniforms really popped. All the waitresses wore these super frilly apron dresses that looked like they came straight out of Alice in Wonderland. I'd never been inside a Queen Donut before, but I'd seen pics of the uniforms floating around online, so I had a pretty good idea of what they looked like.

There were a ton of different kinds of donuts on display at the counter when we walked in.

"Oh my god," my sister cooed. "It's so hard to choose." Her eyes glittered.

But unlike her, I was no mere novice. I'd already scrutinized the menu on the train ride over.

"Ooh, Oneechan, look," she said. "Check out the waitresses. Aren't they gorgeous?"

"Wow," I agreed. "But that's no big deal for me. I get my fill of pretty girls every day at school." I flipped my hair.

"Because you rent out Ajisai-senpai and Mai-senpai as your friends?"

"Believe me, I couldn't afford that for a piddly 10,000 yen a month."

Ugh, stop talking to me! I thought. Let me pick my donuts in peace!

After practicing my order several times in my head, I went and stood in the line. It wasn't just my social anxiety that made me not want to keep the poor girl at the counter waiting for me to figure it out. It was only common courtesy, right? …Right?

As I worried away, it soon became my turn to order.

"Hello, welcome to Queen Donut," the counter girl chirped, greeting me with pep in her voice. "Will your order be for here or to go?"

"Uh, um," I stammered. I panicked and tried to point to the donut I wanted in the lineup.

But just then, I heard someone very near me saying a baffled

“Wait, what?” and I lifted my head.

The girl standing behind the counter was a girl my age with gorgeous black hair. Wait a sec.

“Wait, Satsuki-san?” I cried. She and I both stared at each other, equally dumbfounded.

“Oh my god,” I said. “Your uniform looks super cute on you!”

She didn’t say anything in response, and that’s when I realized I’d let my mouth run and say something really stupid.

“Amaori,” she muttered in a low voice.

She was dressed in a cutesy-wutesy outfit that I thought you couldn’t have gotten her to wear had you groveled on the ground and begged. It looked like a cosplay, but, oddly, it suited her. To be honest, I think that was just because she was so phenomenally gorgeous.

“Oh, um, uh.” I could feel someone else’s eyes on me, and when I looked over, my sister was standing next to me looking befuddled. What was she doing here?! Oh yeah, we’d come to get donuts together! I’d clean forgotten what with this unexpected run-in with Satsuki-san.

“Huh?!” she yelped. “Oneechan, do you know this pretty waitress?”

“I guess you could say she’s my classmate… I guess…”

“You know that’s not right, Amaori,” Satsuki-san chastised. Tongs in hand, she laid out exactly what our relationship was. “You must be her little sister. Nice to meet you. You may call me Koto Satsuki, and I am your sister’s girlfriend.”

“You’re dating?!” my sister shrieked. She looked at me with a horrified stare, her mouth trembling in fright. I hadn’t seen her give me that look since that time in junior high when I gave myself an ice bath. I was trying to catch a cold so I could skip the field trip the next day, since I wouldn’t have had any friends there.

Anyway, uh…

“Wait, so, are you two-ti—I mean, uh, wow, good for you guys!” She fake laughed. Yeah, I caught that bit-back “two-timing,” Sis. You’re not wrong, but cut it out.

“L-let’s leave it here for now!” I said. “Um, uh, I-I’m ready to order!”

My sister looked like she wanted to say more, but I cut the conversation short and pointed to the menu. I knew she'd just catch me again on the way home… The responsibility of explaining what was going on was closing in on me… My stomach felt like it was being filled with lead.

But before all that—

"Amaori, my shift ends in fifteen minutes," Satsuki-san said. "Will you wait for me?"

"Huh?"

She beamed at me with a customer service smile that didn't quite reach her eyes. "You will wait for me, won't you?"

"Sure."

I had no idea just what she wanted me for, but I felt like if I fled, she'd just follow me home. If it devolved into a three-way battle with my sister and Satsuki-san, there wouldn't even be any bones left of me by the time they were done. I guess tackling them each one at a time was the smarter way to go…

"For now," I said, addressing my sister, "go home and eat without me."

"Sure, Oneechan. But once you get home, you and me are gonna have a lot to talk about."

It felt like she'd done the mental equivalent of yanking me by the collar. God, she had completely the wrong idea about what was going on… Wait, but wasn't this all Satsuki-san's fault? *Hey, Satsuki-san! A little help here!*

My sister got her donuts to go and left while I hung around in the store's dining area, blankly staring at my phone and munching on a donut fresh out of the fryer. I was one of those folks who didn't mind other people giving me odd looks for eating alone. If anything, I actually found being alone more comfortable than eating with someone else.

The donuts I'd heard so much about were good. Nice and crispy.

Fifteen minutes later, I saw Satsuki-san leave the counter and go into the back, so I cleaned up my tray and headed out behind the shop.

There I found her taking out the trash with two of her coworkers. They chattered away like a bunch of close work friends. I wasn't comfortable just strolling right out into their midst, so I hung back and watched them discreetly.

But Satsuki-san noticed me and called out, "Oh! Sorry, Amaori. I'm just finishing up, so give me a moment."

"Ooh, is that your friend, Koto-chan?" one of her coworkers said.

"A teen! She's so cute!"

I giggled weirdly. I wasn't used to people making a fuss over me like that.

Oh shoot, I thought. Satsuki-san went back inside! Now I was left out here with these strangers.

"Koto-chan's been here only a month," one of the girls confided in me, "but she's already such a good worker."

"Yeah, she learns everything right off the bat," the other added. "She's incredible."

"Hey, do you go to school with her? What's she like? I bet she's totally the super serious class president type."

"Oh yeah, I can totally see that. She seems like she'd be such a good leader."

"Well, uh," I said. "Y-yeah, I guess you're right! She's really smart and a good friend to rely on!" Mind you, all she did right now was read books in class and refuse to have anything to do with anyone, but still! At any rate, it looked like Satsuki-san was working her hardest to master the skill of communicating at work. What was this? A sudden feeling of solidarity towards her?

"So does she have a boyfriend or anything?" one of the coworkers asked. "She has to. I mean, she's so pretty."

"I bet she's dating the handsome student council president senpai or something. Or a friend from childhood, you know?"

"Oh my god, that's too perfect for her!"

The girls cracked each other up.

Well, she didn't have a boyfriend, but she did have a girlfriend. And sorry, not so handsome here. But there was indeed a drop-dead gorgeous childhood friend. Mind you, I couldn't say any of that, so

instead I kept practicing my single skill: the forced, polite smile. This smile was so useful you could call it an S-class smile. (That's not what that means.)

As the coworkers babysat me, Satsuki-san, who'd changed into her street clothes, stepped out. "Thanks for your help today," she said to them. "Goodbye."

"Bye, thanks for your hard work!" they chorused.

She gave them a dutiful bow, the picture of good manners, before coming over to me.

"Let's go, Amaori," she said.

"O-okay, sure."

We walked side by side down the road to the train station. So… not only did I not know why she'd had me stay behind, but from here on out I was walking into a minefield. I needed to figure out what would set off her land mines and what wouldn't. Time to test my skills as a Minesweeper champ, I thought.

"Uh…" I began. "So I guess you work a part-time job, huh, Satsuki-san?"

She said nothing. Did I seriously land on a mine on the first move?!

She put a hand to her forehead and shook her head ever so slightly. "Before that," she said, "let's talk about what you saw earlier."

Ohhh no. She had the wrong idea. My little sister had randomly decided to get Queen Donut and had dragged me along, that was all.

"I-it's okay!" I reassured her. "It's not against the school rules to have a job, after all! And the law doesn't say anything about it either!"

"Is that your idea of comforting me?" she said. "My god, you're really something."

I had a funny feeling she didn't mean that as a compliment.

Then she asked, "Can you keep a secret?"

"O-of course! I won't tell a soul if you don't want me to!"

If there was one thing as important—or heck, even more important—as the school rules or the law, it was people's feelings. I didn't know why Sasuki-san had a job, but if she didn't want people to

know, I wouldn't go blabbing about it. Besides, I was also a member of the guilty conscience club!

"Satsuki-san, it's okay," I told her, clenching my fists. "Relax. Believe in Amaori Renako."

She stared back at me blankly. "No. I can't."

"But why not?!"

"…Because I'm mean and nasty. I don't trust people that easily."

"Th-that's not true! Satsuki-san, you're a nice person!" I insisted. "Sorry."

"Don't apologize. You're really just annoying me…"

Her rubbing salt in my wound really lent credibility to that assertion of nastiness.

"But come on," I tried again. "We're dating, aren't we?"

"And what does that have to do with anything?"

"Huh?! Well, I mean, you trusted me enough to ask me to be your girlfriend, didn't you?"

"As someone is fond of saying, you were destined to be with her, so I didn't exactly have a choice in the matter, did I? Just because we've started dating doesn't mean you've suddenly transformed into someone I'd trust with my secrets."

I mean, she wasn't wrong!

"I guess that's a good point," I mumbled. "I'm not as good as someone like Ajisai-san or Kaho-chan."

"Kaho-chan's not…" Satsuki-san's voice dropped. "I don't know what you think about her *per se*, but I don't think she's quite as nice as you're imagining… Well, she's interesting, at any rate."

"Huh, really? Oh, come to think of it, you're pretty tight with her, aren't you?"

"Hmm… Well, I suppose. I think that may be attributed to the usefulness factor, though."

Wait, usefulness? Like Satsuki-san using Kaho-chan? Or the other way around?! What on earth did she mean?

"No matter how curious you are," she said, "I'm not telling anybody. So this conversation ends here."

"Okay…"

That only made Kaho-chan more mysterious. Kaho-chan was always cute and bubbly, like a cartoon mascot. What skeletons could she have hiding in her closet?

Hesitantly, I asked, "Hey, is something up with Ajisai-san too?"

Satsuki-san narrowed her eyes. "Promise not to tell?"

"Huh?!"

Well, I guess Ajisai-san really was just too good to be true. Nothing odd for her to have one or two secrets. It'd be odd if she didn't have them. Maybe, late at night, she skulked through the streets in a dog mask, leering at the feral cats… Or, you know, something like that. If she didn't, she'd be too good to fit in with the rest of society.

But I didn't want to hear those kinds of things about Ajisai-san! Okay, that was a lie. I kind of wanted to hear those things! Sorry, I was actually super interested! I wanted to know everything there was to know about Ajisai-san!

"I-I won't breathe a word to anyone!" I promised.

"Okay…"

She lowered her eyes. Whatever it was must have been hard for her to get off her chest. Tension coiled in my stomach.

"So the thing about Sena…" Satsuki-san began.

"Yeah?"

"It happens at lunchtime, when I go to the cafeteria and eat alone."

"Y-yeah?"

"And then, before I know it, she appears. She comes and sits next to me and tells me about, oh, I don't know. What you all have been up to today, what's on TV. All these pointless things. And what's more… she seems happy to do so."

Satsuki-san sounded exactly like she was telling a ghost story. I gulped. "And then?"

Her eyebrows bunched together as she frowned. "But the thing is…since she's already eaten lunch with you, she must be full. She's only doing it to be nice to me. She keeps bringing over rice balls and

pastries and pretending to eat them so she can keep me company until I'm done."

As she said this, I heard Ajisai-san's bashful giggle ring through my mind.

I screamed, "That's just her being an incredibly, transcendently good person!"

"I agree." See, even self-proclaimed mean and nasty Satsuki-san acknowledged it. "I can't even imagine how someone could turn out like that." Satsuki-san pulled a face of disgust. That didn't strike me as the kind of face someone should make when giving compliments, but whatever. "So, I suppose if I don't trust her," Satsuki-san admitted, "that means I have a definite flaw in my character."

"Incredible." Imagine being so nice that you unlocked even Satsuki-san's bitter heart. But what exactly was Ajisai-san's dark side? Did she even have one? Heck, could you have a person without a dark side? Well, that was the thing—Ajisai-san wasn't a person to begin with. She was an angel.

"Compared to Ajisai-san," I confessed in a choked voice, "I'm about as trustworthy as a habitual luggage thief."

"I would say you're a bit better than that…"

That was about the extent of her efforts to compliment me.

Satsuki-san started walking ahead and, a note of embarrassment creeping into her voice said, "Well, but I suppose I can show you something…"

A rather risky thing to say to someone she couldn't trust, I thought.

"Do you know the phrase 'when you've come this far, you might as well go for broke'?"

Yup. That was my sister and me in a nutshell. I'd come out this far with her to grab a donut, and she'd gone for breaking me.

Satsuki-san and I kept walking, farther and farther away from the train station. Then we finally arrived.

"Here we are," she said.

Uh…I wasn't sure how to describe it. Let me just come right out and say it: it was a dump of a two-story apartment building. The paintwork was peeling off, and the outer stairs were caked in rust. A

couple of abandoned bikes missing their tires lay nearby.

And the nameplate on the second apartment on the first floor said "Koto." I stiffened as Satsuki-san put the key in the knob. After rattling it several times, she jerked open the poorly fitted door and walked in, calling, "I'm home." Uh…

"What's wrong?" she asked, turning around in the entranceway.

"Uh, nothing."

She leered at me like the witch inviting Hansel and Gretel into her candy house.

"Don't be shy," she said. "We're dating, aren't we?"

"O-okay. Th-thanks for having me…"

I boldly took my first step into the dungeon. A horrible uncomfortable feeling that something bad was going to happen prickled my skin.

She led me down a narrow corridor and opened a sliding door. After turning on the light, she gestured with the palm of her hand. "Now, come on in," she said. "This is my room."

"Um…"

"It's not much, but make yourself at home. And when I say 'it's not much,' I do mean it literally."

"What's with the disclaimer?"

"You look stiff," she said, "so I thought it might lighten you up a bit."

"I'm only acting like this because you keep saying all this cryptic crap without telling me what's going on!" I insisted.

"Well, that's fair."

Satsuki-san put her school bag down in the corner. She then arranged a low tea table in the center of the room and gave me a flat cushion to sit on. Her room was about half the size of mine and furnished with an old chest of drawers, a small bookcase, a floor-length mirror, and an electric fan. Welcome to Satsuki-san's room.

I tentatively seated myself in a formal pose on the cushion.

"So, what do you think?" Satsuki-san asked.

"A-about what?"

“My room. Do you like it?”

“…It’s very tasteful. Captivating, if you will.”

My absurdly serious answer was apparently not what she was looking for.

“You can just say it’s small,” she said.

“Uh, I mean…”

“It’s fine. I don’t care. It’s just the truth, after all.” She practically spat the words at me.

I wondered if she’d wanted me to see this. Was this some strategy to make me feel guilty so I wouldn’t breathe a peep about her job? But she didn’t have to go that far. I wasn’t planning on telling anybody anyway.

The fact that she distrusted me enough to resort to this made me sad. I knew we weren’t friends yet or anything, but come on. We were in the same friend group, for Pete’s sake…

“Hey, Satsuki-san,” I said. “You know, I…”

I was about to say that I didn’t care why she worked a part-time job and seeing this new side of her didn’t really change how I felt about her. But just then, someone squealed, “Ooh!” in a voice as bright as a freshly changed light bulb. The voice’s owner skidded into the room. She was a beautiful young lady with black hair like Satsuki-san’s, but hers was curled into a perm.

“Ooh, who’s this, who’s this?!” she squealed. “Is this your friend? You have friends, Satsuki-chan?!”

“Just like everyone else,” Satsuki-san told her.

“I can’t believe it! Satsuki-chan brought a friend over! Ooh, should I whip up some red sticky rice to celebrate?”

“No, it’s really not like that…” she protested.

It only took one glimpse of this tall beauty to know exactly who she was. Her almond-shaped eyes were slanted upwards slightly, with big, dark irises. Her lower eyelashes were long and perfect. Her whole face was almost a mirror image of Satsuki-san’s. Yup, she was Satsuki-san’s older sister.

“I-it’s nice to meet you, Oneesan,” I said. “I’m grateful to have Satsuki-san around, as she’s always looking out for me.” I stumbled over

some of my words but bowed all the same.

Her sister smiled friendly enough anyway. “Ooh, really? I’m glad you look out for her too. I mean, you know how she is, right? I get worried, to be honest, that she might be bullied at school. She’s really quiet and shy sometimes, after all, but she’s a good kid deep down.”

God, Satsuki’s sister was chatty. I couldn’t even get a word in edgewise. Also, quiet and shy? Who?? *You sure you’re not talking about me?* I thought.

Satsuki-san sighed. “You really are a pain, you know that?”

“Oh, come on! I’m not a pain at all. Oh, when you have the time, I want to hear all about what Satsuki-chan’s like at school! ’Cause Oneechan loooves Satsuki-chan! That’s right! Oneechan, Oneechan.” She giggled. “Oh, come to think of it, I have the funniest story about Satsuki-chan from the other day.”

Satsuki-san pushed her sister away and slowly shook her head. “By the way, Amaori,” she said. “This isn’t my sister. This is my mom.”

“Wait, for real?!”

No way. She looked so young. What, did the beauty gene stop people from aging?

Satsuki’s mom giggled at how shocked I looked. “Aww, c’mon, you should have let her keep calling me Oneechan. Satsuki-chan, you’re such a big meanie.”

“Knock it off, Mom.”

Satsuki-san looked as tired as a boxer after a full round.

“Wait, are you sure?” I asked. “Your mom’s so cute.”

“That’s enough, Amaori,” Satsuki-san said. “Don’t give her compliments. You shouldn’t feed the wildlife.”

“You’re so mean, Satsuki-chan!” her mom whined, puffing up her cheeks.

She looked exactly like her daughter, yet her eyes were all bright and sparkly. It threw me for a major loop. She felt like an adult Satsuki-san who’d mellowed out a bunch. Was this a Satsuki-san from a parallel universe? One where she hadn’t met Mai, perhaps?

“I thought you were working today, Mom,” Satsuki-san pointed out.

“Yup, sure am,” her mom said. “But I’m going to go after meeting with a client, so I’ll be heading in a little late.”

“Ah. Great, this was a huge mistake.”

Man, it really sucked to have someone this resistant to honoring boundaries in your own family. This reminded me of the moment when my sister barged in on Mai, Ajisai-san, and me. *I totally get you, Satsuki-san*, I thought.

“Oh, but you’re right, I really should be getting ready,” Satsuki-san’s mom said. “Hey, Amaori-chan!”

“Y-yeah?” I stuttered.

Satsuki-san’s mom squeezed my hands. She smelled nice, all grown-up.

“Thank you for being friends with Satsuki-chan,” she said. “You’d think being a girl would have made her turn out sweeter, but I promise she’s really very nice all the same. Just the other day, she gave me socks she knitted herself for my birthday. She said she’d checked out a book on knitting, learned the process from a friend, and then practiced it for ages.”

“Mom!” Satsuki-san protested.

Satsuki-san’s mom giggled. “Ooh, someone’s mad. Okay, have fun, kids!”

And just like that, she ran out. She’d talked more than Satsuki-san ever did in a whole day at school.

Now there was just me, Satsuki-san, and an unbearable silence.

Then, as if to challenge that last item on the list, Satsuki-san muttered, “So that was my mom.”

“I-I gathered that.”

“Don’t get the wrong idea about her. I know she looks like an idiot, but she’s managed to bring me up all by herself. Well, she may still be an idiot, but that’s beside the point.”

I hadn’t thought she’d looked like an idiot at all, actually. But she sure seemed to be enjoying herself…

“So, is that why you work a part-time job?” I asked.

“Stop,” she said. “I don’t want you to look at my mom and start

pitying me."

"Ah, okay."

I'd just meant that it was incredible how she helped support her family's finances. But I guess Satsuki-san didn't want to be seen that way either.

But then she seemed to change her mind, and she shook her head again. "Although," she said, "you're not wrong. It's important to meet the parents in an arranged marriage. Once you know their personalities and careers, next up is learning about their family background."

"…Is this what you meant by going for broke?"

"Right. I wasn't exactly trying to hide her from you, but it wouldn't have sat right with me if I hadn't said anything."

All the light had gone from Satsuki-san's eyes.

"Since you already saw me in that awful getup from work, I thought I'd tease you a bit by showing you the house and then take you to the station."

"G-gotcha."

"I hadn't wanted to show you this much. Oh, now I'm done for."

She slumped to the ground helplessly. D-damn… Her mom had completely exposed the persona she wore at home. A wave of secondhand embarrassment hit me hard.

"I-it's okay, Satsuki-san," I said. "I won't tell anyone."

"I don't trust you. I'm sure the whole school will know by tomorrow morning some way or another. They'll know I'm the kind of girl who knits her mom socks for her birthday because she's sensitive to the cold…"

"But isn't that a good thing?!"

"Acting cold and blunt to guys and girls alike is my special weapon. But I'm going to have to go around with everyone pointing at me behind my back and calling me a mama's girl for the rest of my days…"

"That's literally just you being a good member of the family, though!"

Satsuki-san fell completely silent. Was this the quiet and shy part

her mom was talking about? The thing is, everyone at school talked about Satsuki-san as this super cool, super pretty girl. Would it really be so bad for them to know she was sweet to her mom? Wouldn't that just add more depth?

Man, what was I supposed to do about this? Pull the "Oops, it's getting late. I'd better run. See you tomorrow!" card? *Quit running by default, Amaori Renako!* I chastised myself. *Or else Satsuki-san will spend all three years of high school alone!*

Urgh. I was in agony.

"U-um, hey, you know," I finally said.

"…What now?"

She raised her head and looked at me like a long-haired cat dripping with water.

"S-s-s-so, um, you know."

Why was I about to bring this up? I didn't know, but all the same, I knew I'd stumbled upon something Satsuki-san had never wanted to see, hurting her in the process. And it just didn't sit right with me to walk off completely unscathed myself. I lacked the talent to fly, but hey—if my friend fell off a ledge, at least I could jump so she'd never have to fall alone.

So I said, hoping it would provide her even the slightest bit of comfort, "Hey, you know what? Up until I turned over a new leaf when I started high school, I was a socially awkward loner!"

I'd done it. I'd actually come out and said it. I'd never wanted anyone to know; heck, I hadn't even told Mai my junior high backstory. I'd meant to take this secret to the grave, but now I'd spilled the beans to Satsuki-san. God, this was freaky. I was terrified of what her reaction might be to this powerful confession of mine.

And she…

…raised her head slightly and said, "Okay."

I was agape. "That's it?!"

She looked at me with lifeless eyes and mumbled, "I mean…it makes sense."

"It makes sense?! What do you mean, it makes sense? I did such a good job reinventing my image in high school!"

“You act weird sometimes, you’re super self-deprecating, and your self-esteem is rock bottom. You rarely make eye contact, and you always seem happiest when you’re just staring at your phone.”

“Stop! Spare me the analysis!” I cried.

“Well, what did you want me to say? ‘Ooh, no way! I always thought you were a people person through and through!’ Don’t be a fool. Even Sena would laugh at that.”

I was crushed. “But I tried so hard!” I wailed. I lurched upright in tears, at a total loss for what to do now. “I’ve been trying so, so hard to change myself… But the past keeps catching up to me no matter what I do!”

“Hey, wait,” she called.

But I ignored her and ran out of the apartment. It was just like that day when I’d been drained to the last drop and dashed up to the roof on impulse.

I ran through the streets recklessly, where I proceeded to become utterly lost. Oh god, where was I…? My phone was dead, it was completely dark out, and there were basically no people or cars passing by. Well, not that it would have made any difference if there were, since I wasn’t cut out to ask for directions to begin with. At any rate, it was starting to get chilly, and I felt helpless stuck here next to this random rice field in the middle of nowhere…

It was over for me. I was going to die here. If this was how I was to meet my untimely demise, then I wished I’d been a little kinder to Mai…

I parked my butt at the side of the road and gazed vaguely up into the sky. The moon’s light shone pale through the clouds that threatened to cover it. I’d always longed to be beautiful like that. The way I saw it, beauty always belonged to someone else. It was never for me. It was for my old elementary school classmates who were now living the high life on Instagram, or for Oduka Mai, the girl in our class who shone as bright as the sun. If I’d kept my distance and just watched her from afar, then I would have probably never ended up in this crummy situation. But I’d wanted to be just like her. I’d wanted to be like the moon, shining in reflection of her glory.

Then I heard a voice pant, “Th-there you are…”

I lifted my head. And there she was.

Satsuki-san stood there, her long hair tied back in a ponytail, panting to catch her breath.

“Huh?” I said. I blinked up at her repeatedly. “Why are you here, Satsuki-san…?”

“I knew you’d come here,” she said. Her eyes, those eyes that looked like they could see straight into my soul, frowned. Then she sighed. “Well. If only. Actually, I had no idea, so I had to run around and look for you in the usual way. Here, this is yours.”

“Oh! That’s my wallet.”

“Don’t leave it at my house. How else are you going to catch your train home?”

She tossed it to me. God, I’d been so out of it that I hadn’t even noticed my wallet wasn’t on me. I was a wreck. And then I’d made Satsuki-san go to the trouble of running around looking for me.

“Ugh,” I groaned. “Sorry for all the bother, Satsuki-san.”

I folded in on myself, resigned to the fact that she’d be pissed at me.

“It’s fine,” she said shortly. “I’m pretty used to this kind of thing.”

She extended a hand to me. I sized it up a few times, comparing it to mine, before I tentatively inched my hand out too. She took it and pulled me to my feet. Her hand didn’t feel cool like it had before—instead it was kind of warm and sweaty. I guess she really had been running.

“Goodness,” she said. “You’re a fool.”

“Yeah… I’m sorry.”

I couldn’t have told you why, but something about the way Satsuki-san acted, even though she was being her normal self, seemed so much kinder to me.

We walked like that, hand-in-hand, together for a while. At some point, the clouds overhead parted, freeing up the moon to light our way.

“My mom works nights,” she told me.

“Uh-huh.”

“That means she often comes home drunk in the morning, and I’m always having to take care of her. Among other people… There’s a certain tall girl who’s always crashing at my apartment.”

“Really?”

“Yes.”

There were too many things that I wanted to say, but the words refused to come out.

Then Satsuki-san squeezed my hand. “What made you do it?” she asked.

“Huh?”

She tried again, asking the question in a level voice. “What made you want to come out of your shell?”

There was no way she had any actual interest in me, so I figured this was just her attempt at figuring out what had prompted all of this.

“Uh…” I began. “I dunno, I guess I was kind of jealous.”

“…Of what, exactly?”

“You know, of having tons of friends, of being the center of everything, of stopping for snacks on the way home from school, of dating and stuff. All those fun things that everyone else got to do. I just got kinda, you know. Jealous.”

Maybe it was because I had just been lost and alone in the dark for ages, but it actually felt like kind of a relief to be able to talk to someone else. Still, I was pretty sure I was running my mouth off talking about things that didn’t really matter to Satsuki-san.

“Hmm,” she said.

That was another lame reaction, but whatever. I wasn’t exactly looking for her sympathy or anything.

“I didn’t mind going home and playing video games every day,” I went on, faltering as I went. “It was super fun. It’s just, well, I can play video games anytime I want, you know? But not everything’s like that, and I guess I started wanting to try those other things too…”

There was something, I dunno…selfish, I guess, about going on like this. I was a fool who’d set out across the ocean with an impossible dream. It was my choice, and then I’d also chosen to run away once I’d realized I couldn’t make my dream come true. God, I sucked.

“I see,” Satsuki-san said. She nodded just a bit, a movement so small it couldn’t have stirred up a ripple in water. “This was all important to you, I take it.”

“Y-yeah…”

“Then, thank you. Thank you for telling me about it.”

What was all this about? What did this feeling mean? It was a weird, bashful, embarrassed sensation. If this had happened in the middle of the day, I think my heart would have ached so bad from the shame that I would have wanted to yank it right out of my chest. But

right now, only Satsuki-san and the moon were watching me.

Her thank-you almost made me get carried away and thank her too, for letting me talk to her. I almost felt like Satsuki-san and I had just shared something together. Yeah. Something really special.

"And here we are," she said.

"Hey, wait! This isn't the train station! This is your house!" I protested.

"Well, aren't you cold? Your hands feel like icicles, even though it's July. You need a bath to warm you up, so you can stay the night."

I started to say, "Huh? No way, I can't…"

But just then, it hit me. Oh yeah. My sister was waiting for me at home, leering at me like an ogre, under the mistaken impression I was two-timing Mai with Satsuki-san. And believe me, my sister was a real pain in the butt when you weren't in her good books… Ugh.

"You can use my phone to let your parents know," Satsuki-san said.

"…Okay." She'd won me over.

I'd only barely just come over to her house for the first time, so I could never have imagined I'd end up staying the night…

Hey, wait a sec. Were Satsuki-san and I bonding?

At any rate, I ended up chilling at Satsuki-san's house once again. Her place wasn't exactly brand-spanking new or all that big, but when I took a better look around, I saw little bits of homey touches here and there. The curtains were all embroidered, and whoever'd put away the seasonings in the kitchen was clearly a seasoned organizer. The place felt lived-in. I guess I hadn't noticed it earlier, but… Well, it felt nice here.

I borrowed Satsuki-san's phone right away and called home. Damn, was it already this late? They were probably worried sick. But I forced myself to call anyway.

Then I sighed. "I guess I'll have to go home and change before school tomorrow."

"Why not wear my P.E. clothes to class?" Satsuki-san suggested. "I'll let you borrow them."

"Uh, if I showed up to school with you wearing your P.E. clothes,

I mean…”

I could see it already. My internal Mai screamed, “NOOOOO!” in the agonies of her death throes.

“That’s a really bad idea!” I finished.

“Are you sure?” she said. “I mean, I don’t mind.” Then she cackled.

“Oh god, you look so evil…”

I really wished Satsuki-san would stop using me as a means to shock the living daylights out of Mai, but I guess that’s what this relationship was all about to begin with.

“I’ve run the bath,” Satsuki-san said. “I have spare clothes you’re free to use if you like. Underwear too.”

“Oh, no, I couldn’t,” I protested.

“I’ll give you three for 980 yen, or 326 yen each. I’ll be nice and knock off the fraction for you.”

“You’re going to charge me for them?! Well, this is still loads better than Mai, but come on!”

As opposed to Mai buying literally everything for me, I much preferred being with someone like Satsuki-san who nickel-and-dimed me at every opportunity. Wait, but I didn’t mean, like, *with* with!

“Okay, I’m going to have a bath now,” I said.

“Mm-hmm,” Satsuki-san said as she changed into her own loungewear.

After turning down her offer, I went off to the changing room. I stripped, dumped my clothes in the basket, and then stepped into the bathroom proper with its stainless-steel tub. However, when I flipped the switch, the lights didn’t turn on.

“Huh?” I said. Maybe the bulb was burnt out. I mean, it was a pretty old building…

I washed myself down and then carefully dipped my toe in the water of the tub. Ahh, nice and warm… But I was still uneasy. The light from the moon outside wasn’t enough to light up the place. It was pitch-black in here!

“I’ll leave your towel outside,” Satsuki-san called as she came by

to check on me. “Wait, Amaori, why is it so dark in there?”

She looked at me in shock as I sat soaking in the tub, holding my legs to my chest. “Uh, ’cause the lights didn’t work,” I explained.

“Oh, I see. I apologize. Hold on just one moment.”

I heard the sound of some rustling from the changing room. What on earth was she doing?

Then the bathroom door opened, and in came Satsuki-san.

“Wait!” I screeched. “Why are you naked?!”

“Well, since you’re already here, I can’t pass up this opportunity,” she pointed out.

“What do you mean?!”

“You took a bath with Mai at the hotel, didn’t you? So if I do the same, she and I’ll be tied with a score of 1-1.”

“What are you talking about?! What, did I get lost and wander off into some parallel universe where you’re ranked on how many times you’ve bathed with me?”

“You’re being much too loud,” she said. “And there’s hardly any room in the tub. Budge up a little.”

“Both those things are your own darn fault!”

My one saving grace was that I could barely see Satsuki-san’s naked form, thanks to it being so damn dark. If the lights had been on, dazzling the place, I would’ve had to turn and face the wall forever. There wasn’t nearly enough space for both of us, so Satsuki-san sat on the edge of the tub and crossed her legs.

“Move your legs,” she said.

“Huh? Uh, well, okay.”

Then, the moment after I folded my legs, a light inside the tub flicked on. It was almost like magic, fantastical and mesmerizing.

“What is this?” I asked.

“It’s a deluxe bath light,” she said. “But that’s not all.”

She flipped a switch in front of the shower head, and a bouquet of flowers, courtesy of the indirect lighting, burst into bloom on the walls: enormous blossoms in blue, red, and white. Wow. Wow, wow, wow! I thought.

“Those wall stickers are nice, aren’t they? And let’s round it all off with this.”

Satsuki-san turned a small box upside down and poured a large helping of flower petals into the tub.

Oh my god. Wow. A freaking bath in flower petals. And it smelled great! Blooming anemones covered every bit of the walls. I felt like I was bathing in the middle of a giant flower garden, like in a scene out of a storybook.

“Beautiful, Satsuki-san!” I cried.

She chuckled. “Isn’t it?”

I was so caught up in the moment that I lifted my head and then immediately regretted it.

“Beautiful…Satsuki-san…” I murmured.

“Hmm?” she asked. “What’s wrong?”

I couldn’t take my eyes off of her. She had her hair held back with a barrette, save for one lock that fell to her shoulders and clung to her skin. Droplets of condensation rolled down her pale body, granting her appearance a glossy sheen. She didn’t have an extra bit of weight on her anywhere. Her features were already slender and gorgeous enough to compare her to a keenly sharpened sword, but bathed in the glow of the two indirect lights, she reached a whole other level of beauty. Had she been displayed at the end of a museum tour, every person seeing her would have clean forgot every other art piece in the whole building.

“I take it you’re a big fan?” she said. “Of the tub, that is.”

“Uh, yeah, uh… Of the tub, yeah…”

I looked away and sank down into the bathwater up to my mouth.

“Look,” Satsuki-san pointed out, “I even have a book stand for bathing. I made it myself as a DIY project. Isn’t that cool?”

“Y-yeah…”

Nope, nope, nope. I’d almost been on the verge of forgetting that what we had right here in front of me was Koto Satsuki-san, a member of the top elite group of girls at Ashigaya High with a face that could rival Oduka Mai’s. Heck, she was challenging enough for me to talk to, forget getting in the bath with her!

Her uncanny beauty was so overwhelming that I forgot how to

speak. My head moved on its own to take another look, just to make sure she was as pretty as I remembered.

Satsuki-san gloated, pleased that I'd complimented her beloved bathroom.

"Oh, yes, Amaori," she said. "I'll scrub you down too."

"Bwuh?! Wh-why?"

"Well, in terms of bathing together, merely sharing a tub with you won't be enough to deal her a killing blow. What, are you being shy?"

"It's not a me issue! The idea alone is mortifying!"

"Then we'll just have to do it like this," she said.

"Hello?!"

And then Satsuki-san dove into the tub. Mind you, this tub was small. So small I could barely stretch my legs—that small. With the two of us in it, we were touching no matter what we did. Not to mention, Satsuki-san sat facing me. Her long legs slotted with mine like we were a couple of Legos, and the sensation… Hoo boy, that was a sensation all right!

"S-S-S-Satsuki-san!" I wailed.

"Oh, what's wrong? You don't look so good."

She reached out, grabbed a container from in front of the shower, and poured a little something into her palm.

"This is a body soap you can use even after you're already in the tub," she explained. "I'll scrub you down, so be patient and sit tight for a minute."

"No way!" I cried. "No freaking way!"

"What's wrong? What's all this fuss about?" She furrowed her eyebrows, and her lips quirked into a semi-circle. "Don't be like that. I know you're into this kind of thing, aren't you? Won't you let your wife wash you down and make you feel good, partner?"

"What do you mean, feel good?!"

No more! No more of this! What the hell was up with all this sexual tension? Why on earth couldn't Satsuki-san pick up on it? What, did she seriously mean this as some kind of ordinary friendly bonding thing?

She lathered up the soap and then started by taking my right hand. “Now sit still,” she told me. She gripped it in both hands and then began to soap me up. *Ohhh my god*, I thought. She lavished attention to each and every individual finger. Satsuki-san’s thin, soft hands stroked m-my fingers! Beads of water glistened in her eyelashes as she bent over her work in deep concentration. It almost felt she was a Venus committing an act of altruism for poor, lowly me. If this had been a dream? Then hell yes, I would have been so there for it. But because this was real life, this was waaaaay too much!

I couldn’t handle it any longer. If I was getting this worked up over the fingers on my right hand, then by the time she’d finished fondling my whole body, my nerves would have been burnt out, leaving me crippled.

“U-u-um, Satsuki-san…” I said.

“Hmm?”

Scrub, scrub, scrub.

“Um, so, uh, about the thing you’re doing right now. Uh.”

“Mm-hmm?”

I summoned up my courage, squeezed my eyes shut, and yelled with the full force of my entire being, “I-it’s really freaking horny!”

“Mm-hmm… Wait, what?”

Now she finally looked at me. Our eyes met at an impossibly short distance apart. Instantly, she fixed me with a steely-sharp glare, but she also turned just as red to her ears.

“H-horny?” she repeated. “Hold on a moment there. What on earth are you imagining?”

“Oh, come on!” This wasn’t my fault! Right? Right?! “It’s freaking obvious!”

“No, it isn’t!” she snapped. “All I’m doing is bathing you! It’s like when someone washes your back for you.”

“No, it’s completely different!” I snapped back. “Because this whole thing feels so damn sexy!”

“S-se-…” Satsuki-san’s lips flapped like a fish. “H-hey, Amaori…? Do you actually…swing that way? I know I said you’re free to like whomever you want, but please don’t go getting any ideas.”

“No!” I cried. “Satsuki-san, you’re the one making it all sexual, not me! Oh, and that reminds me! What the hell was up with that book you gave me the other day? I opened it on the train, you know!”

“And what difference does that make? It’s not that ba… Ah.”

Her face turned even grimmer as the realization hit her. Her eyes moistened. “Well, come to think of it,” she mumbled, “it may have been a bit…you know.”

“It was blatantly you-know! It was forty pages right off the bat of this lady and a teenage girl going at it like rabbits! And very passionately, I might add! Satsuki-san, what on earth do you think I am?”

“I-I didn’t mean it like that!” she protested. “Don’t get hung up on all that; just read the book! And those scenes are absolutely vital to the theme, thank you very much.”

“Oh, for the love of— Whatever, I’m getting out. If you do any more sexy stuff to me, I’m going to lose my marbles!”

“W-wait, Amaori-san. We’re both girls to begin with, so I swear I didn’t mean it like that—”

I tried to scramble up and out of the tub, but my hand was still soapy and slipped off the rim.

“Ack!” I screamed.

“Careful, Amao—”

I tumbled back into the bath headfirst like the klutz I was in an explosion of hot water and flower petals.

Oh my god… Owww... Wait. Actually, not ow. I’d apparently avoided the worst of the fall and landed on something soft. Whew, thank god.

Then an absolutely chilling voice over my head growled, “Amaori.”

“Huh?”

I realized then that I was clinging to something. They felt about the size of volume dials on a speaker, and touching them gave me the weirdest sensation. *Wait. Could these…be…?*

I’d plunged forward (holding on for dear life!) into Satsuki-san’s boobs.

“U-um…”

Still practically plastered to her, I slowly lifted my head.

Satsuki-san… She glared at me as if she’d just come back from murdering three people. Oh god…

“I-I’m sorry…” I whimpered.

“…Just hurry up and get off me.”

“B-but I have to say! Satsuki-san, your boobs are so warm and soft and squishy! Thank you!”

Then she looked at me as if she’d just come back from murdering a hundred people, and that shut me up real quick.

“S-sorry about that,” I mumbled. I slowly willed my legs to work and rose off of her.

As my hands left her boobs, Satsuki-san frowned for the briefest of moments and made a tiny “Mm” sound. What a sexy noise…from Satsuki-san. The Satsuki-san, the one everyone admired as this cool beauty, with her nose always in a book, nonchalant about everything.

“H-hey, Amaori,” she said. “Hurry up.”

“R-right, I’m going!”

Now I leaped off of her in a panic. Trying to prevent her from hearing how rapidly my heart was pounding in my chest, I shrank into myself and scrambled out of the bath. As I left the room, I glanced back behind me.

“…Amaori,” Satsuki-san said.

“Wh-what now?!”

“…Go take a shower to get the soap off.”

“Huh?! Okay, yeah, will do!”

I did as she said and then sprinted out of the bathroom. Even the lukewarm water of the shower couldn’t do a thing to dampen the way I felt like I was on fire.

I put on a brand-new pair of cotton undies and a pair of pajamas I’d borrowed from Satsuki-san before climbing into the guest futon in her room. She and I barely said a word to each other as we finished getting ready for bed. She spread her futon out next to mine and turned

her back to me.

But I couldn't sleep. Despite the soothing powers of my beloved blankets, I couldn't calm down at all. Even when I closed my eyes, Satsuki-san's naked body was staring right at me from the backs of my eyelids!

On top of that, the memories of my bath with Mai were fresh in my mind now too, saturating my brain with an erotic pink tinge. Damn these pretty girls. This was the exact reason why I…

Satsuki-san's blankets rustled as she rolled over. I jolted, wondering if she'd picked up on my wild fantasies, but her breathing told me she was sound asleep.

As my eyes got used to the dark, I could see more of her gentle sleeping face. An unconscious sigh escaped my lips. Wow, she was gorgeous. What a rare opportunity to stare at this pretty girl for as long as I liked. I wondered what it was that made us look so different…

Ah, now I remembered. Everything.

I still couldn't believe that this was happening. First, I'd gone to school at Ashigaya High, then I'd met Oduka Mai. If I hadn't befriended her, I never would have ended up spending the night with this girl—someone so utterly divorced from my own reality that I'd have never run into her otherwise. I'm sure Satsuki-san saw me as just another piece of gravel under the railroad tracks of her life, but to me, she was a light in the sky, forever out of my reach. But I'd gotten to learn so much about her today. She worked a part-time job. Family was number one to her. She hated losing. She'd come looking for me, she loved bathing, and she was, in every respect, a kind person.

People who lived their lives to the fullest were incredible to miserable ol' loner me. I figured we had a totally different set of values, given how Satsuki-san always gave everything 100 percent. But that was something I'd never have picked up on just by chatting with her at school. I was still taking my first baby steps down the long road to becoming a popular, social butterfly.

Just then, I heard a whisper that sounded like a cool, refreshing breeze. "Are you asleep already?"

My heart skipped a beat. "N-not yet," I said.

"Okay." Satsuki-san cracked her eyes open and looked at me. They

glowed like gems in the dark.

"You know," she told me, "Mai left that futon here for when she sleeps over."

"Oh, that checks out," I said.

"What does?"

"Oh, uh, nothing."

I'd have sounded like a total perv if I told her it smelled like Mai…

"Does she come over often?" I asked. "Mai, I mean."

"She practically lived over here in elementary school," Satsuki-san said. "But then she started getting too busy with work."

"Oh yeah. You mean like when she went overseas recently, right?"

For a long moment, there was no response. Then Satsuki-san yawned ever so slightly. She rolled over in bed, turning her back to me.

"We have school tomorrow," she reminded me. "So hurry up and go to sleep."

"Oh, okay… Good night."

"Good night."

I forced my eyes shut, but my heartbeat still wouldn't calm down. Sleep was a long way off, I figured, what with Satsuki-san right next to me and the smell of Mai from the futon… Urgh.

I heard rustling for a while as Satsuki-san also tossed and turned. Maybe, just like me, she was struggling to sleep, with everything that happened today weighing on her mind. We were only girlfriends on a contractual basis, nothing more. But I couldn't help thinking that we were almost like friends who were really connecting with each other. … Man, I wished I was her friend.

As my restless mind raced, I realized that I needed to go to the bathroom. I tiptoed out of bed and slid out of the room so that I wouldn't wake up Satsuki-san. Then I snuck back in, and, just as I was about to slide under the covers again, she said, "Oh, that reminds me."

"Huh? Sorry, Satsuki-san, did I wake you up?"

She didn't answer but instead reached out and grabbed her phone beside her pillow. "I forgot to take a photo earlier," she said. "You

know. Photographic evidence for dropping hints."

"Come on, what? Do we really need that?"

"Without substantial evidence, we can't prove any of this happened. In case worse comes to worst."

Yeah, but what if worse doesn't come at all, huh?

"And I have you here already," she said. "So let's take one now. We can afford to get a little bold with it."

"Bold, huh?"

I rubbed my tired eyes. My arms and legs felt heavy, and the border between reality and dreamland blurred.

"How about a photo of us kissing?" she asked. The words sounded so far away I wasn't sure if they were from the next room over or not.

"Huh?" I said.

"Come on, Amaori. Turn your cheek this way."

Satsuki-san shuffled closer to me, phone at the ready. I could feel her body heat. I figured she wasn't going to let me sleep until she'd got what she wanted, so I thought, *Oh well, why not?*

"Don't you dare show this to anyone," I warned her.

"Relax, I won't. It's just better to have a gun in my pocket on standby. I'd be arrested if I actually shot it."

"Yeah, yeah, whatever."

Satsuki-san's face slowly pulled close to mine. Instinctively, I turned towards her. A sensation of softness grazed my lips. Satsuki-san's lips were ever-so-faintly chilly, just like she was.

Our tryst lasted only a moment before our lips parted. Satsuki-san was as stiff as a board, unable to say anything. I didn't think she'd even taken the photo. Wait. Huh?

"Satsuki-san?" I asked.

Her faced flushed bright red. "Wh-wh-wh… You… You?!" she squeaked.

"Y-yeah?"

"What do you think you're doing?!"

As Satsuki-san yelled at me, my tired brain slowly began to wake

up.

“You were the one who brought up kissing, weren’t you?”

“When someone says that, they mean on the cheek, don’t they?!”

Wait, what…? Wait. Did I just? Did I just kiss…Satsuki-san?

“A-and it was my first kiss ever too …” she went on.

My brain took a hot second to reboot. Did I really? Did I really just do something that outlandish? My heart rate skyrocketed the way it does when you wake up and realize you’ve overslept and missed an important appointment.

“Wait, no!” I leaped upright and waved my arms in flustered denial.

“It’s okay!” I insisted. “We’re just friends right now, so it doesn’t count!” Wait, but that wasn’t right. “Well, we’re not friends. We’re girlfriends. So does that mean it…does?”

Oh no! I couldn’t believe that, never mind how half-asleep I was, I’d gone and robbed Satsuki-san of her once-in-a-lifetime opportunity to have her first kiss.

“Wait, I mean, I’m sorry. I’m so sorry.” I was a desperate, apologizing mess. “That’s not at all what I meant to do.”

If Satsuki-san put a lot of stock into her first kiss, then I’d just committed a reprehensible act. I needed to apologize to her in any way possible.

Satsuki-san turned her back on me flipping out and quietly lowered herself down onto her futon. “Whatever,” she said. “It’s no big deal.”

“Even if you look calm, your ears are still red as hell!” I pointed out.

“I kiss people all the time anyway,” she muttered. “It’s not like this was my first time or whatever. More like my 300,000,000th time.”

“Who are you even trying to lie to?!”

“Then are you going to take responsibility for this or what?” she snapped.

“No, um. I mean,” I said. “Uh… Wh-what exactly do you mean by that?”

For a moment, Satsuki-san was at a loss for words. Then she screamed, “N-never mind! You imbecile! Whatever, just go to sleep!”

Her face was still as red as could be. This wasn’t just another one of our little secrets. Now we shared a freaking huge secret. How did this even happen?

Gah, and now I wouldn’t be able to sleep a wink!

Intermission: Kaho and Satsuki

heeey saa-chan♥

Kaho

Satsuki

What now?

howd the socks turn out?

Kaho

Satsuki

Oh, right.

Satsuki

She loved them.

Satsuki

Thank you.

yeah no worries!
whatre friends for?♥

Kaho

Satsuki

Sorry, I can't chat right now.

ah fr?

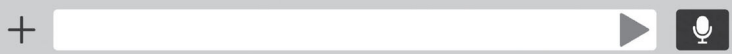
Kaho

Satsuki

Amaori's gone missing.

what?!

Kaho



Intermission: Kaho and Satsuki

Satsuki

That idiot left her wallet at my house, so I'm running around trying to find her. And I'm getting hot too.

you good? want me to come help?

Kaho

Satsuki

No, I'm fine, thank you.

Satsuki

Oh, Kaho.

Satsuki

I'd like to make hand warmers next time. You'll have to show me how.

you got it! ill make you so good at arts and crafts that you'll be able to make a dress in no time!

Kaho

Satsuki

Let's not get carried away now.

Kaho: heeey saa-chan ♥

Satsuki: What now?

Kaho: howd the socks turn out?

Satsuki: Oh, right.

Satsuki: She loved them.

Satsuki: Thank you.

Kaho: yeah no worries! whatre friends for? ♥

Satsuki: Sorry, I can't chat right now.

Kaho: ah fr?

Satsuki: Amaori's gone missing.

Kaho: what?!

Satsuki: That idiot left her wallet at my house, so I'm running around trying to find her. And I'm getting hot too.

Kaho: you good? want me to come help?

Satsuki: No, I'm fine, thank you.

Satsuki: Oh, Kaho.

Satsuki: I'd like to make hand warmers next time. You'll have to show me how.

Kaho: you got it! ill make you so good at arts and crafts that you'll be able to make a dress in no time!

Satsuki: Let's not get carried away now.

Chapter 3:
Nope! No Matter How Hard I Try, There's No Freaking Way I Can Handle It When Love is War!

I WAS HAVING a kickass dream about being in college and living the high life on my own. I'd become a full-on extrovert and a popular figure at my university. With over 30,000 friends and relentless demands for my attention, every minute of my schedule was packed. The voices never stopped clamoring for me, like the audience of a famous rock band calling out for an encore.

"Aww, come on, guys!" I sighed. "But how could I ever say no to you?"

I lay on top of my huge bed and, when I checked my phone, found that I had more than 999 messages. It was a chore and a half just responding to them all. Tee-hee.

As I giggled ever so prettily, someone walked in. He was, of course, my complete hunksmobile boyfriend, an actor with an annual income of 200,000,000 yen. Oh yeah, and thanks to the boy toy's connections, I had a spot on a TV drama that was airing next month, Mondays at 9 PM. Prime time, baby.

After my enormous success with reinventing myself in high school, I'd lived a charmed life. By the time I entered college, I had everything I wanted. And believe me, I wasn't waking up to reality anytime soon. This was an endless dream.

"Why hello, my darling Renako," said the boy toy. "Let's get up and face the start of another amazing day."

He extended his hand to me, his smile even more dazzling than the morning sun. Oh, this was pure bliss. I could just feel how much he loved me. I took his delicate, pale hand and…

…screamed, "Wait a second, you're Oduka Mai! What the hell are you doing here?"

"What do you mean? Isn't it obvious? I'm your…" She giggled. "Well, do I even need to say it?"

She leaped into bed, burrowed under the pristine white sheets,

and playfully snuggled me. Eep!

"Hey, cut it out!" I cried. "I don't need you butting into my dreams too!"

I shoved her head away as she came after me like a big old dog. I'd been having the time of my life here and then boom! Now the dream was a nightmare!

"For the last time, I'm not going to be your girlfriend! We're friends! Friends with Rena-fits! You and I are not a thing, not even in the deepest depths of my subconscious, thank you very much!" I yelled.

But in no time at all, she threw herself on me. The girl poking her head out of the sheets was now stark naked. AGGH! Her black hair spilled past her neck and tickled my likewise naked collarbone.

…Hey, wait a second. Black hair?

Her eyes were like the moon glowing radiant in a starless sky.

"Why, hello there, Amaori," she said.

"You've got to be kidding me!" I cried.

Satsuki-san grinned at me with an alluring smile I'd never seen on her before, and my breath was snatched away. That grinning mouth met mine.

"I've fallen for you," she said. "Amaori, I love you."

I screamed and lurched upright, flinging off my blanket in the process.

I awoke from the nightmare. I'd been dreaming the exact same awful thing ever since I'd spent the night at Satsuki-san's house. Seriously, what was that about? And why her? I would have been okay with, let's just say for the sake of argument, Mai. Actually, no, take that back. I mean, it was already awkward enough that my brain had taken the idea that my friends were fighting over me and had gone off the rails with it, but let's ignore that aspect for now. Why, oh why, did Satsuki-san show up? And why were we about to do the whole…you know…the both of us being naked thing? Did I maybe…have feelings for Satsuki-san? No, no, no, no! I was just letting the dream get to me, dammit! All I'd done was feel her up, sleep in the same room as her, and kiss her. …Which was more than enough, thank you very much!

Uggh. It wasn't like I was a total horndog compared to other girls my age. We all had, ahem, strange dreams, right? If only I had someone I could talk to about it, to confirm…

I was in the bathroom, in the midst of the mighty ordeal of doing my bangs, when a figure loomed behind me.

"Oneeechaaan," it moaned.

M-my sister! I'd been hell-bent on avoiding her at home, but she'd finally caught me.

"I was hoping you and I could have a little chat today," she said.

"Y-yeah?"

"Let's see. How should I put this? Sure, we all know you've cleaned up nicely in high school and are over the moon about that. But that's no excuse for what you're doing."

"Urk!"

My sister folded her arms and started to lecture me like a guidance counselor. "More than anything, you need to be honest. If you keep taking advantage of everyone around you for your own entertainment, then pretty soon you're going to end up with no friends at all."

"Eep."

It wasn't like I was trying to cheat on Mai. Besides, she and I weren't even dating to begin with. Nevertheless, my sister's words cut me like a knife.

"Ultimately, this is your life, not mine. It doesn't concern me at all," she went on. "But what you're doing right now has nothing to do with being popular or being normal. Hurting someone just because you've gotten some attention? That's called being evil."

Oh, Little Sister-senpai! As this eighth-grade girl took me to task, I just about fell to the ground and apologized.

"Well, that's pretty much all I wanted to say," she finished. "Anyway, I have practice this morning, so I'm heading out now."

"Uh-huh… Thank you so much…"

Clad in a sailor suit uniform and with her ponytail bouncing jauntily, my illustrious little sister-senpai dashed out, leaving me staring into the mirror, dead inside and trying to keep my bangs at bay with

the hairpins.

Well, I guess this is what I get… I told myself. *Ha ha…*

My sister's serious lecture struck a chord, but that was okay. I was only dating Satsuki-san for two weeks, and when that was over and she'd made up with Mai, everything would go back to normal. And that meant that I could also wave goodbye to those dirty dreams in two weeks.

…They'll be gone, I swear!

Still making excuses (although to whom, lord only knows), I set off for school. Jeez, how was I supposed to see Satsuki-san when I was feeling like this? Although, knowing Satsuki-san, she'd just give me a cold stare, act like this was yet another ordeal for her, and say, "What on earth are you thinking about, you complete buffoon?" Yeah, for sure she would. Yup. The image of bashful, blushing Satsuki-san going, "D-don't be r-ridiculous…" didn't exist, not even in my head. No way.

As I walked into class, Hasegawa-san and Hirano-san called out to me with a "H-hello, Amaori-san!" and a "Hey there!"

"Oh, hey," I said. I smiled awkwardly and waved, shoving the image of Satsuki-san back into the depths of my mind. "Nice to see you."

Both girls sighed in visible relief.

"Oh, what a blissful time of day this is!" Hasegawa-san cooed. "This early in the morning, no one gets mad at you, even if you say hi to a pretty girl!"

"It's only in the mornings that I can come up to Amaori-san," Hirano-san sighed. "Today's the best day of my life."

"Uh, wh-what're you guys talking about?" I giggled. Oh, those two! They always flattered me whenever I ran into them, and for that, I loved them. I liked anyone who'd like me, really. My need for approval was being slaked by the gallon. The girls made me feel like: Uh-huh, that's me, Amaori Renako. No matter what people say, I'm still Amaori Renako, a member of Mai's friend group.

I smiled all neatly and prettily, channeling my inner Ajisai-san. "Oh, not at all!" I said. "We can chat at any time. I want to be friends with both of you too."

“Huh?!” Hasegawa-san cried out. “Do you really mean it? You’re not just saying that to be nice because you’re popular, right? Oh, but who cares if you are. I’ll take it anyway.”

“Ooh, let’s be friends, Amaori-san,” Hirano-san said. “Oh boy, I’d be so, so lucky if I got to see you every day. Do you think we can exchange contact info too?”

“Yeah, of course!” I said. “Come on, let’s be pals!”

Oh, this was the best. This was what it was all about. Not having to worry about preserving my spot in the school’s pecking order and spending time with like-minded friends rocked.

And just then, when we were all smiling and talking together, Satsuki-san walked in. “Good morning,” she said.

“Eeep! H-hey, Satsuki-san…”

Satsuki-san paused near me for a moment before going to her seat. Th-that made my heart race… Once again, the Satsuki-san from my dreams flashed through my mind.

“Anyway, so about exchanging contacts,” I said, turning back around. But now there were hearts in Hasegawa-san and Hirano-san’s eyes. Huh?!

“Koto-san just said hello to me…” Hasegawa-san breathed. “Raven-haired beauty Koto-san… Am I dreaming?”

“I can’t believe it. Koto-san talked to me? This is the best day ever…”

“Uh, hey? My contact info?”

No joke, it was like they didn’t even hear me. The two of them stared at Satsuki-san in a blushing daze. *Are you freaking kidding me?* I thought.

“Oh, her hair is so beautiful…” Hasegawa-san sighed. “She’s so slender, and oh god! She’s just perfect.”

“If I could be reborn, I’d want to come back looking like her…”

No matter how much I tried to get their attention, it was like their ears didn’t register a thing. I staggered back to my seat. Was this really happening?

Just as I passed by Satsuki-san, she stopped me in my tracks with an “Amaori.” Eep.

“Wh-what’s up?” I asked.

“Uh…” She couldn’t meet my eyes as she spoke. “We’re on for after school again today, right?”

My heart twanged. (I knew where this was going!)

“Uh, sure,” I said.

Hey, wait a sec, what? Was Satsuki-san seriously nervous? Oh god, what the hell, oh god, what the hell, oh god, what the hell. As those two phrases waltzed through my brain, everything started spinning around me. It was almost like Satsuki-san was starting to see me in a romantic light! Nah, no way. Not when I’d just started thinking we could be friends. This was backtracking in a major way!

I sat down in a fit of nerves. When I looked back over my shoulder, I locked eyes with Satsuki-san. Oh god… We both rushed to look away, as if to hide the fact that we’d just made eye contact. Hasegawa-san and Hirano-san were right. She really was crazy gorgeous. Okay, no, for the umpteenth time, not happening! I reminded myself. Jeez, what the hell was going on? We were acting like a bunch of junior high schoolers who couldn’t face each other after having our first kiss!

But Satsuki-san and I were definitely not like that!

As I trembled in my chair, Ajisai-san walked up. “Oh wow,” she said. “You’re here early. How’s it going, Rena-chan?”

I looked up, reeling. Ah, she was as cute as ever. My wonderful soft-haired angel… My hands moved on their own volition and clasped themselves together in prayer.

“Wait, huh?” she said. “What’re you doing?”

“Ajisai-san, I love you,” I sighed.

“Huh?!”

She reddened at my earnest confession. Even this reaction was just too perfect and girly, a far cry from Satsuki-san.

“Um, uh, um… Rena-chan, that’s, uh, a pretty bold thing to say in class… But I mean, uh… I’ve been really hoping you’d, uh, say that for the longest time now, so… Um, I mean,” she stuttered. She fiddled with her hair wildly, conscious about the attention on her.

This girl was made of cuteness from head to toe. I desperately

pleaded, “Ajisai-san, please be mine forever. Please, for as long as I live… Be my literal BFF…”

“Huh?! Y-yeah, sure, um, but…huh?”

Thanks to Ajisai-san’s soothing powers, I was able to weather the day until after school. Really, thank goodness for Ajisai-san being in my class. If not for her, I’d have barricaded myself in the infirmary halfway through first period. Mai had been super kind to me and Satsuki-san throughout all of this, but that only made me feel more awkward, so I ended up avoiding her. Ugh, I was inadvertently proving that I wasn’t cut out for this whole romance thing…

Well, at any rate, the real ordeal was going to begin after school! Could someone come and take me away before then? Maybe a prince riding in on a noble steed… Wait, actually, pass on that. I got too nervous around guys. Please, send a princess instead!

Alas, no convenient princess popped up. However, I got an even better version of that when, after school, the angel herself tugged on my sleeve.

“U-uh, hey, Rena-chan,” she said.

“Yeah, what’s up?”

I stopped packing up to go home, and she smiled brightly. Her smile was like a clear blue sky full of rainbows. *I have no choice but to stan*, I thought.

“Well, you know, um. I don’t have any plans today,” she said.

“Oh, wow. That’s rare.”

“Oh, no, it’s not really…” Just then, a light bulb seemed to go off in her head, and she clapped her hands. “No, never mind! You’re right. It’s very, very rare!”

This sudden burst of cuteness made me feel all warm and fuzzy inside. See, Ajisai-san was super popular, so she had people asking her to hang out literally every day. The calendar in her schedule book was packed from cover to cover. There was only one Ajisai-san in this world, so the fact that I even got the chance to talk to her at school made me one lucky duck indeed. And so, because Ajisai-san only had 24 hours in a day and I wanted to waste as little of her precious time as possible, I figured I should get a move on, pronto. But it seemed like she still had

something she wanted to say to me. She stood there fidgeting and meshing her fingers together while giving me an adorable look.

"So, 'cause of that," she said. "Um. I'm kinda on the fence about what to do today."

"Yeah?"

"…So I'm kinda on the fence about what to do today."

"Y-yeah…?"

Ajisai-san kept staring right at me. Wh-why did I suddenly feel uncomfortable? I felt like I was being pressured into making a decision, with the tick-tick-tick of a countdown timer. Wait, what was going on? I had no idea! What was I supposed to do? I wanted to make Ajisai-san happy and do whatever it was she wanted from me!

But time ran out while I panicked.

"Amaori, what are you doing?" Satsuki-san asked as she walked up. She was like a blackout curtain blocking the rays of Ajisai-san's light.

"Oh, uh, nothing," I said. "See you tomorrow, Ajisai-sa—"

As I made to give her a little wave, Ajisai-san looked astounded. What now?!

"Uh, is s-something wrong, Ajisai-san?" I asked. It was the first time I'd ever seen her pull that face out of her repertoire. She looked exactly like Kaho-chan whenever Mai rebuffed her.

But like a sat-upon cushion popping back into its original shape, Ajisai-san immediately bounced back into the same pretty, cheerful Ajisai-san I knew and loved. Sweating, she waved both hands in denial.

"Oh, no, it's nothing!" she insisted. "Nothing at all! Now that I think about it, I, uh, I think I have an errand I need to run today! You know me, busy, busy, busy! I'll see you later, okay?"

"Y-yeah, sure thing."

Yeah, see? I knew it. Free time and Ajisai-san didn't belong in the same sentence.

I said goodbye to her and then left with Satsuki-san. She'd seemed pretty off-kilter this morning, but it looked like she was all good now.

"What's going on with Sena?" she asked.

“She thought she had some downtime, but I guess she’s busy after all. Oh, hey, what do you think about inviting her to come study with us one of these days? Maybe she can join us the next time she’s free.”

“Sorry,” Satsuki-san said, “but I don’t like studying with too many other people. It makes it less effective.”

Really? Huh. Well, I was the pupil here, so I couldn’t say anything. I was merely a lost lamb following Satsuki-sensei’s teaching policies.

And then, who should appear before the witch clutching my reins but a blonde-haired, blue-eyed beauty.

“Oh, hello, Renako,” she said. “I see you and Satsuki-san are being chummy again today.”

Oduka Mai put a hand to her chest and smiled at me with an expression of perfect composure.

“What do you think of her, Satsuki?” Mai asked. “Don’t you think Renako’s just wonderful? My heart thunders in my breast every time I come near her—oh, that heart warmer that she is. That’s just Renako’s charm.”

She nodded as she talked, lost in her own little world. *Uh, hey, this is the classroom. Watch what you’re saying!* I thought.

Normally, Satsuki-san would have ignored Mai and just walked right on past. Then Mai would have shrugged, and this little daily routine would have been over. But today that routine went right out the window.

Because Satsuki-san said, “Absolutely. You know, I think she might be rather unique.”

“Huh?” I said.

As Satsuki-san stood next to me, she put her hands on her hips and grinned in a way that struck me as oddly happy.

“Actually, I’ve been learning a few things myself too,” she went on. “Like the other day, hmm? Remember, Amaori?”

Huh? Wh-what happened the other day…? Was she talking about the night I spent at her place?

My cheeks immediately turned bright red. I mean, those were fighting words, and I knew Mai was about to snap back.

But she didn't. She kept right on smiling like this was business as usual.

"Oh?" she said. "Why, what happened?"

"I'm afraid I can't tell," Satsuki-san said. "Right, Amaori? You didn't want me to talk about it to people outside our relationship, did you?"

"I-I mean, yeah!"

Even as I caught the implication in her words, I couldn't help but agree. We couldn't just bring this up in the freaking classroom, thank you very much!

And now, see, that's how you picked a fight. Because this time, Mai…

…just continued to beam away! What the heck was going on?

"Oh, I see," she said. "A private little joke? I'd love to be let in on it sometime."

"I'm so sorry," said Satsuki-san, giving my arm a squeeze that clearly broadcasted our relationship status. Eep. What kind of soap opera crap was this? "But this is private. It's our little secret. Right, Amaori?"

Oh god, someone come save me, I thought. I looked away from her, utterly dead inside. Just then, I happened to catch Kaho-chan's eye as she hung out with a different group of kids in our class. She gave me a thumbs-up and a big ol' grin like she was sure everything was coming up sunshine and daisies, and nothing from here on out should get me down. I knew that Mai was born an empress, but since when had Kaho-chan become Miss Positive Thinking? Did she have such high self-esteem because everyone liked her just the way she was?

Mai cleared her throat with a little cough before stepping out of our way.

"Really, now?" she said. "Well, in that case, I apologize. Please, carry on and have a wonderful time with your friendship. It'd be horribly rude of me to butt in."

Mai watched us walk away, smiling to the bitter end. I guess she was upholding her agreement with me. I hugged my shoulders in tight as I tiptoed off. Oh god.

Satsuki-san covered her hand with her mouth and tittered in delight. “Did you see how frustrated she looked?” she asked.

“Y-yeah, you think?”

Mai once got so jealous of me and Ajisai-san that she went nuts on me. It must have been really, really hard for her to hold back her hostility around Satsuki-san just now.

“I think I’m starting to feel kind of bad for her,” I admitted.

“Well,” Satsuki-san said, “if she keeps antagonizing me, then I’ll have no choice but to whip out the photographic evidence.”

“Could you not?!”

Now it was my turn to yank Satsuki-san away. With how everything stood now, would it even be possible for Mai and Satsuki-san to make up? Well, I guess we still had a week left in the contract. I hadn’t made any progress on fixing their relationship, but on the bright side, I sure was getting in a lot of studying for my exams.

“Amaori,” Satsuki-san said as we sat studying side by side in the library, “did you move on before you understood the previous material again?”

“Uh, yeah? Isn’t it more efficient this way?”

“Maybe, if your only goal is to ace the exam. But we’re still in our first year of school. It’s important to think of the future and give ourselves a solid foundation across the board.”

“Wait, Satsuki-san, you even think about my future…?”

“What?” she said.

“What?”

Her hand brushed mine. With that single touch, a spark kindled in my heart. As I sat there, baffled by my own feelings, Satsuki-san withdrew her hand and stared at it.

“…Listen, Amaori,” she said. “Let me tell you something, just FYI.”

“Y-yeah?”

“Yes, we did…t-touch lips. But even so, my heart still belongs to me. I’m not going to let anybody steal it. So don’t…push your luck, understand?”

She was trying her very hardest to sound blasé about this, but her cheeks were red. Okay, look, if she was going to go making a face like that, of course I was going to get embarrassed too!

"I don't think I've ever pushed my luck," I told her. "I'm certainly not trying to. What are you even talking about?"

"I mean… For example, you treat me like I'm your woman."

"I've literally never done that!"

"You'll take all my meager savings and gamble them away again, I just know it," Satsuki-san sighed. "I know, I know, I can't complain since I'm the one who chose to marry you, after all. I'll simply have to set aside a good allowance for you next time."

"Will you cut that out?" I cried. "Quit acting like this is actually happening!"

It was only after I'd yelled that when I realized this was her idea of a joke: her getting revenge on me. She must have gotten annoyed that I'd made her so embarrassed. The nerve of this girl!

"And why the heck are you painting me out to be some abusive husband?" I asked.

"Because you look like the female equivalent of a deadbeat dad," Satsuki-san said.

"Wha— That's really mean! Besides, you look like you'd take it upon yourself to support some lame-o wannabe musician!"

"Meaning you and I are a couple in this theoretical future?"

"What, so you're going to work and take care of me, a washed-up musician and deadbeat?"

I tried to picture this. I'd be sitting around on my butt all day, watching TV and spouting, "Don't worry! We'll make it big in no time, just you wait and see!" Yikes. That was the worst possible future. Worse than being Mai's pet, even.

"At any rate," I said, "I don't think you'd ever let me use you like that. If I lost my job, you'd kick me out of the house and be like, 'I found you a new job. You're starting tomorrow; here's the address.'"

"That's right," she said. "I would. But don't worry. Once you got home, I'd have a nice, steaming cup of instant ramen waiting for you."

"But you know how to cook!"

Satsuki-san chuckled and then sighed. “Oh well. Unfortunately for you, I don’t plan to have feelings for anyone. Romance is a lot of hogwash, to my mind.”

Oh boy, that was a classic Satsuki-san-ism right there. I didn’t know if she really meant it or not, but I did feel like it helped me understand her better. Satsuki-san had said there were some parts of her that even she couldn’t understand…but I think she was only acting like the person she wanted to be. Which I understood. ’Cause I was the same way. I considered how normal girls acted, and then I faked it until I made it a little more every day. That’s why I wanted to support Satsuki-san through her own personal journey.

“You say that, Satsuki-san,” I teased, giving her a Mai-style malicious grin, “but we all know you’re really falling for me.”

She slapped my forehead with a ruler.

“Owww!” I whined.

“The next time you make fun of me, I’ll beat you so hard you’ll score zeroes in every class,” she said.

“It was just a joke! Jeez, you’re freaky!”

We snarled at each other, like we were spouting curses and threats, but this whole conversation was, well… It felt a lot like being friends.

And then there was the incident that night. Looking back on it, I think that must have kicked off all the nonsense that made our first school term end on a bang.

It was the middle of the night, and I was studying by myself in my room. It was cool out this evening, so even though all I had was the fan going and the window cracked open, I was hella focused. *Oh yeah, I’m just too cool*, I thought.

You know, I’d finally started to pick up on what was so fun about studying. I was knocking all my homework assignments and the extra assignments from Satsuki-san out of the park. Just like with games, there was something more fun about doing it with a friend. Yeah, you play fighting games and FPS’s with other people, sure. But it also rocks to play single-player action games or RPGs and then chat about it later

like, “So, how far did you get?”

Well. Not that I’d ever done that before. But still, studying was the same way. I think spending all that time with Satsuki-san and seeing how serious she was about studying got some of her motivation to rub off on me. I wish I didn’t need that extra push to look forward to going to class, but…alas, I was not exactly the best of students. But hey, I was even studying at home at this point, so what if I actually made it into the top of the class? Satsuki-san would be so pissed at me!

With that cheery thought for motivation, I set about tackling my remaining problems. And yet, and yet! A few days of intense effort was not enough to make my academic abilities dramatically skyrocket, so I got stumped on the last question. I figured I could leave it for tomorrow and ask Satsuki-san about it, but… Man, leaving just one problem undone was kind of a letdown.

I picked up my phone. Satsuki-san’s name showed up on my messaging app friends list, but I crossed my arms and groaned. She was probably on her way home from work, and tired to boot. Wouldn’t I just be bothering her?

Just then, my phone vibrated. Only Mai sent me messages at this time of night, so I figured it was another one of those selfies featuring Mai living the high life.

But hold the phone. This was a message from Ajisai-san! How come she was texting me?

Are you free right now? she asked.

Uh…? I-I mean, yeah, but like…why was she asking? If I told her I wasn’t doing anything, was she gonna be like, *lmao I figured?* No, no, no, Ajisai-san wouldn’t say that.

I sent her back an honest, “Yup! Sure am.”

She sent me another text. *Can I call?*

Huh?! Wait, keep holding that phone. What? *O-oh my god, should I say yes?* I wondered. Phone in hand, I closed my window and started pacing my room. Phone calls are the kryptonite of the socially anxious, a dreadful punishment that forces you to talk one-on-one. If I couldn’t see the other person’s facial expressions or body language, then how the hell was I supposed to figure out their tone from voice alone? On top of that, whenever I bungled the timing of when to speak and ended up

talking over them, I felt so guilty I just about straight-up died!

No, I couldn't do it… Maybe Ajisai-san was messing with me. Maybe this was just a "I'm doing this 'cause Rena-chan's, like, awful at phone calls, lmao" kind of thing. I couldn't handle that.

Hmm, maybe I could ask her what she wanted to talk about first, like, "Huh, what's wrong? Is this something you can't just message me?" If I knew ahead of time what was being discussed, I could mentally prepare for it and be a little less anxious during the call…in theory, at any rate. But that could also sound too cold and clinical. I wasn't sure how Ajisai-san would take it.

Now thoroughly flummoxed about what to do, I decided to text, "Yeah, hit me! I'm chill." But my stomach was decidedly not chill.

Moments later, as if she'd been waiting by the phone for me to respond (well, I mean, she was), the phone rang. Oh god. I wanted to run away.

I lifted my phone up to my ear like I was holding a gun to my temple. "H-hello," I stammered.

Immediately, Ajisai-san's cheery voice hit me at point-blank range. "Oh, hey!" she said.

Oh god. My innards spontaneously writhed in agony.

"Thank goodness," she said. "I wasn't sure if I should actually call, since maybe you'd already gone to bed. I was really worried about bothering you."

Ajisai-san! Ajisai-san's vocal cords in such close proximity! Practically whispering in my ear!

"Oh, uh, nah," I said. "I was just, um, studying."

"Ooh, really? Sorry. Am I interrupting you?"

"No, no, not at all! I actually just finished!" I cried, rushing to smooth things over.

"Oh, okay. That's good to hear," she said, sounding so genuinely relieved that my heart cried tears of joy.

Phones made my socializing skills even worse, so I avoided them like the plague whenever possible… But like hell could I tell her that. Urgh.

"So, what can I do for you this evening?" I asked. "What inspired

you to go out of your way to call…?"

"Eh, you know," she said. "Not much!"

Not much! Oh, the whims of an angel. Okay, actually, hold on a sec. Were you allowed to just straight-up call people for no reason? Was this a rule that only popular, social girls followed? *Oh, shit*, I realized. Was my inner introvert showing? She must have just found out I was dumb as bricks.

I shook my head to clear it. "W-wow, okay! I guess we all have moments when we just feel like calling up a pal, huh?"

"Y-yeah, I guess," Ajisai-san agreed, and there the conversation stopped.

I was deathly afraid of silence, so I panicked and asked, "So, uh, whatcha up to right now, Ajisai-san?"

"Hmm, I just took a bath. And then I was drying my hair, and then I thought oh, I should call Rena-chan."

"Oh my god. You think about me at home…"

I felt a horrid sense of guilt for squatting on Ajisai-san's mental real estate.

"Huh? Yeah, I do a lot," she said. She followed this up with a little giggle.

An indescribable warmth bloomed in my chest and spread outwards. Was this…happiness? Was it really? Now, for the first time ever, I understood what it meant to be blessed. If I'd looked up "blessed" in the dictionary, I knew I'd find "having Ajisai-san calling you at night" listed under the definitions.

"L-like when?" I prompted.

"Hmm. I guess, like, when I hear one of my favorite songs, I wonder if you'd enjoy it too, you know?"

And with that, I had a revelation of the true way to use a phone. Ajisai-san's tone of voice and inflection were all I had to work with, but they conveyed her emotions perfectly. I couldn't see her, but her gestures and the way she smiled came through just fine anyway. Wasn't this a marvelous phenomenon?

"By the way, Rena-chan, what kind of music do you listen to?" she asked.

“M-m-me? Uh, I… I-I don’t know a lot about what’s playing these days.”

To be real with you, I listened to a lot of game OSTs. When I wanted to get hyped, I’d put final boss themes on loop, but that wasn’t something I could easily explain to other people. I didn’t think Ajisai-san would question it, per se, but if someone just straight-up asked me, “Why?” I didn’t have any other answer besides, “Uh, well, there’s nothing wr-wrong with it, right…?”

“A-actually,” I said, “I’m more curious about the kind of things you listen to! You should tell me sometime! What’s your type in music?”

“M-my type?!” she squeaked.

“Uh? Y-yeah. Your favorite type of music.”

What was this all about? Wait… Was this conversation a trap?

“A-actually, never mind!” I said. “You should tell me what music you don’t like instead! What’s your least favorite song?”

“H-huh? My least favorite? What are you going on about, Rena-chan?”

She burst out into laughter at my panicked outburst. I didn’t usually hear her laugh like this in class. She sounded really comfortable and relaxed. Uh… I wasn’t sure what was going on, but I guessed maybe that hadn’t been a trap after all. At any rate, she seemed to enjoy talking to me, thank goodness.

Ajisai-san laughed long enough to make me think it really wasn’t that funny before she calmed down and breathed a sigh of relief. “That reminds me, Rena-chan,” she said. “Let’s play a game together.”

Huh?! That was out of left field! This reminded me of the time when we went shopping for makeup together. Ajisai-san hadn’t been all sweet and perky like she was at school. She’d been way more…chill, I guess. (Yes, that’s the extent of my vocabulary.) Maybe Ajisai-san, like Mai, felt like she was acting all the time. Come to think of it, I did recall her mentioning once that she was a lot more selfish than she put on. Maybe it took a lot of hard work to be the nice, polite person she seemed to be.

Okay, sure. I’d play with her. Granted, it gave me a shock, but if the angel wanted to let her hair (wings?) down at home, I’d be super glad to hang out with her as much as she wanted. As a representative of

ordinary humanity, that is.

"S-sure," I said. "What game?"

"That's a good question. Hmm, hmm, let me see…"

She sounded like she was enjoying herself, like she was trying to pick a slice of cake from out of a delicious lineup in a bakery case.

"Oh, I know," she said. "How about the game we played at your house that one time? It has online play, right?"

"Oh, yeah, it does. …Is that what you want to do?"

"You betcha!"

Oh, that cheerful reply! Oh, that level 50 attack spell, the strongest in the bright and bubbly girl's arsenal! Bypassing any input from my brain, my eyes turned to hearts, and I nearly died on the spot from the cuteness. No, Ajisai-san, no… Don't just use that voice on anyone, okay…? Boys would fall in love with her faster than they could blink. Thank god I avoided the same fate thanks to my utter inability to handle romance. *But seriously, Ajisai-san, be careful*, I thought.

"I'll bring the game into my room," she said. "Sorry, give me just a sec."

"Yeah, sure. Gotcha."

I could hear Ajisai-san beginning to move around, the phone still pressed up against her ear. In the silence, her breathing came through loud enough that it started to make my heartbeat accelerate.

"You know," I said, "this is my first time playing online with a friend."

"Really?"

"Yeah."

Well, I'd only ever played games with Mai and Ajisai-san anyway.

Ajisai-san oohed in assent. "Cool," she said. "I guess that makes me your first."

"Huh? Y-yeah, I guess."

There was a bit of an odd, un-Ajisai-san-like note to her voice that I wasn't sure how to interpret. That sounded kind of…sexual, right?! Or was my mind just screwed up? I felt like I was about to pass out.

"By the way, Rena-chan," she went on, "when are you coming

over?"

"H-huh?" Her voice was so temptingly seductive that I burst out without thinking, "I'll be right over tonight, like a shot!"

Ajisai-san giggled. Her sweet laughter made my head spin. *Oh god, don't do that!* I thought.

"I mean," I said, "I'm down to hang out anytime, if it's you we're talking about."

Actually, it'd be hard to squeeze anything in until exams were over, but I'd already turned her down once. I swore, I'd get hit by a car, break all my bones, and then get up and run after her before turning her down a second time.

"But I'm guessing we probably shouldn't before finals," she said. "Besides, you're stuck to Satsuki-chan like glue right now."

"No way, that is so not true!" The way she phrased it made it sound like I was picking Satsuki-san over her. "You're always first in my heart, Ajisai-san!"

There was a weird pause.

"…O-oh, really?"

What, did she not believe me?

"…No, Rena-chan," she chided me. "You should be more careful. Don't just go around saying that to anyone. They might get the wrong idea, you know? Nopity nope, just don't."

Gah, I knew it! It was all because I'd turned her down that first time!

I whimpered, "Auauau…"

And as I auauau-ed, Ajisai-san giggled as if she were absolving me of all my sins.

"But still, I'm glad to hear you say that," she said. "Thanks."

I couldn't help but blush and go all tongue-tied at how incredibly sincere her thank-you sounded.

Ajisai-san continued, "Sorry for being so mean just now. I know how hard you're working. It's fine, I'll always be here later. And we can have fun over summer break, right?"

Being treated so insanely nicely mere moments after being teased

made me feel like my soul had reached salvation.

"Uh-huh," I said. "I can't wait."

I really couldn't, but I knew that the prospect of going over to Ajisai-san's house would leave me such a mess of nerves that I wouldn't be able to sleep the night before. Urgh. I had to stop overthinking it. I'd just have to practice it over and over again in my head every night so I wouldn't mess up on the day of.

I heard a big clunking noise in the background, which I figured was Ajisai-san bringing the console to her room. She must've normally kept it out in the living room or something.

"I'm setting it up right now," she told me. "So give me just a sec."

"You got it."

I wondered what her room was like. I couldn't help but imagine it over the phone. Well, it had to be cute. That was a given. It was probably carpeted in flowers and visited by a cool breeze. A little stream meandered through, where many animals came down to drink…

"Oh hey, Rena-chan," Ajisai-san said. "Guess what Kaho-chan told me?"

"Oh, uh, what?"

"She said you're trying to help Mai-chan and Satsuki-chan work out their argument and become friends again."

Well, yes, that was how it ended up turning out…more or less. It also explained that I was always hanging out with Satsuki-san these days as a part of my attempt to persuade her. It wasn't too far off the mark, really…

Ajisai-san's tone was unusually thoughtful as she said, "You know, I'm sorry if I made you uncomfortable. I just don't really get why you're working so hard, you know?"

"Um." Wait, did that mean she thought I looked desperate? Well, maybe I did! *But see here, Ajisai-san*, I thought. With my very limited socializing abilities, keeping up with what everyone else took for granted took literally everything I had.

I was about to answer with some self-deprecating comment along those lines, but I realized that it might make her try to cheer me up with an endless stream of compliments. And that, I knew, would drop

my socialization points to zero and make me want to die. So I gave her a real answer.

"I mean, Oduka-san and Satsuki-san are both in our friend group, right?" I said. "I don't want to see them always fighting all the time, that's all."

I felt like what I was saying was pretty childish, but maybe that's what got the point across so well.

"Yeah, I get you," she said. "You know, I think it's incredible how Kaho-chan's not shy about talking about Satsuki-chan to Mai-chan. I could never. But maybe I'm just cold or heartless or something…"

No, no, no, no.

"If you're cold," I said, "then that makes Satsuki-san 70 percent liquid nitrogen."

Besides, the pool of people I could talk to at school was small enough to begin with. Take Mai and Satsuki-san out of the running with their fighting, and you dealt major damage to that total. Plus, I was completely weak to all the awkward tension. It was a matter of life and death for me, so my efforts were only a desperate struggle to escape with my life. Remember, it was all about me, me, me! *Nice to meet you, I'm a piece of crap!* I thought.

But Ajisai-san just went, "No way." I bet she was shaking her head over the phone. "I've been thinking recently that I need to make more of an effort. So I've been giving my friends some really serious thought and taking steps to change myself a bit."

"Wow," I said. "I never considered that you'd think about these kinds of things too."

It sounded to me like she was doing the exact same thing as Mai but for totally different reasons.

"Uh-huh. Maybe that's why I called you. Maybe…that's a part of that."

"Huh. Okay."

Ajisai-san was incredible, though. No one could match the sort of kindness she showed when she went to keep Satsuki-san company to prevent her from being all alone. I almost instinctively blurted out, "I like you just the way you are!" But then I caught myself. "Just the way you are" was the last thing someone working on changing themselves

wanted to hear. (Source: me.) If someone had gone and taken that condescending attitude towards me when I was working so hard to change myself, I would have been super depressed. Good thing I stopped myself before blabbing something so irresponsible to Ajisai-san. That was a close shave.

As I quailed internally at the near miss, I felt Ajisai-san's warm smile through the phone. "You know," she said, "I really do like you a lot, Rena-chan."

Her voice was so lovely and sweet that it slid straight into my heart.

"You honor me too much, Your Majesty," I managed to croak out.

"Wait, why are you acting like you just got complimented by a king?"

"I like you too, though. I really like you, Ajisai-san!"

"Ooh! Aaah… A-anyway, I promise I'm going to stop being so shy and change! And when I do. Uh. Well, I'll change at any rate!"

"Great! Looking forward to it."

The fact that her voice sounded so troubled from the other side of the phone was a tad concerning, but hey, I guess Ajisai-san was also just putting in a big effort. Maybe someday she'd get sixteen wings and ascend from being an angel to an archangel.

Anyway, once the game was set up and we reached the point where we could actually play together, Ajisai-san's tone of voice suddenly shifted, and I heard her ask, "Huh, what's wrong?"

"What?" I said.

But it didn't seem like she was talking to me. "You can't sleep?" she asked. Based on how she said it, I figured she was talking to a little kid. Probably a baby brother.

"Huh, it's no fair that I get to play games at night? No, it's okay for Oneechan. That's because I'm in high school."

Ajisai-oneechan… Now I started to feel weird. Welcome to the mega hit Ajisai-oneechan whisper ASMR livestream, 6,980 yen per hour… (But I had the friend discount, so I got in for free.)

"No, you can't play right now," she insisted. "You have school tomorrow."

I heard a little boy's voice go, "Aww!" That was me, Ajisai-san's little brother. Wait. No, it was not me.

"Come on now," she said. "Go back to your room and sleep. Huh? Nooo, not right now. I'm on the phone, so quit bothering me."

It seemed like Ajisai-oneechan was in trouble. She was a lot nicer than me, at any rate. I would have been screaming, "Shut up! Go away! Go away already!"

"Huh? Oh, come on," Ajisai-san groaned. "When are you going to grow up and stop being such a needy baby all the time? Why not ask Mom? No? You want me?"

She heaved a huge sigh. Then, as she gave in, she agreed, "Fine. Fiiiiine!" Then she spoke into the phone apologetically. "I'm sorry, Rena-chan."

"No, it's totally okay."

I thought she was just apologizing for making me wait, but then she said, "I need to put one of the kiddos to bed. Give me a minute, sorry."

"Oh, nah, don't worry about it!"

"If you say so. See you in a bit."

Then she hung up the phone.

I was suddenly back in my own little loner world. I plunked down with a thump onto my carpet. The sound of Ajisai-san's voice still lingered in my ears as I zoned out, staring at my phone. It must have been tough to have brothers way younger than you, huh, Ajisai-san? She probably had to help take care of them every day when she got home. Someone as kind as her? Cold and heartless? As if. Heck, when I died, I wanted to be reborn in my next life as Ajisai-san's little sister. Please, give me attention. Put me to sleep.

Then the inner Mai reminded me with her Supadari Smile, "But in this life, aren't you my fiancée?" I shooed that wild image away with my hand. *Hey, you, don't pop up out of nowhere*, I told her.

For the time being, I kept the game on and waited. But eventually Ajisai-san sent me a message saying, "Sorry, I don't think it's going to work out tonight after all. I'm really, really sorry." What a shame… But at the same time, my disappointment couldn't hold a candle to my hope that Ajisai-san wouldn't mind. I mean, I was worth about as much as

one of those freebie characters who arrive in droves of gachas.

I leaned my head up against my bed. Aw, man, that had drained me more than I'd thought… If even a phone call with bright, fun, cute Ajisai-san used this much energy, then how on earth was I going to function as an adult?

As I was stressing over my future, I realized that I was completely out of MP, so I crawled under the bedcovers. Ajisai-san was giving her friends some serious thought, huh? At least the Mai and Satsuki-san conflict would be over soon. And then, next… Well, I guess I had to give my answer to the contest with Mai, huh? Mai had given herself three years to make me fall for her, and while that meant she didn't need to flip out and rush to get it done now, I also didn't think she was the type to sit around and waste time. Even so, I was still dead set on one day proudly calling Mai my best friend.

"Okay," I said.

I rose and decided to go back to my desk for just a little bit more. I couldn't change who I was at a drop of a hat, and as for someday equaling the beauty of my friends? No freaking way was that ever happening. So the best I could do was work hard and see where I could get on effort alone.

I stayed up a little past my bedtime, but with painstaking effort, I completed that one final question. They were baby steps, but I was moving forward, one step at a time every day!

The next day during lunch, I was eating in the classroom with the Mai friend group sans Satsuki-san, same as usual. Then Mai opened her mouth and said, like it was the most natural thing in the world, "By the way, I've been thinking that it's about time I seriously talk things out with Satsuki-san."

I blinked a few times, mid-bite on my pastry. Wait. Talking things out with Satsuki-san? Did that mean what I thought it meant?

Ajisai-san oohed and clapped her hands. Kaho-chan cried, "Way to go, Mai-Mai!"

I was a bit slower on the uptake and went, "You're going to talk to her? Wait. You're going to talk to her?!"

Sure, Mai often made spur-of-the-moment decisions, but what

brought on this sudden change of heart?

Mai, looking as resplendent as ever, smiled at the pretty girl in the seat next to her—Ajisai-san.

"You see, I was talking with Ajisai a bit this morning," she explained.

Say what now? I mean, yes, Mai and Ajisai-san got along well, of course, but I'd never actually seen them talking one-on-one together. They were the two most popular girls in the class. A clandestine meeting between the two of them was like a meeting of world superpowers.

Ajisai-san looked a little bashful. "Sorry for springing it on you out of the blue, Mai-chan," she said.

"Oh no, I don't mind," said Mai. "I was thinking I should do something about this too. You just gave me a big push of encouragement."

"No, it wasn't that much, I swear." Just then, Ajisai-san shot me a look that was probably supposed to be meaningful. Huh? "I was only thinking I'd like to do something to help my friends, that's all."

Mai chuckled. "You're so sweet."

"No, I'm really not."

The two lovely ladies beamed at each other. Jeez, I could practically see the flowers blooming away in the background already. They were almost too pretty, like a scene right out of a work of art. Kaho-chan silently took out her phone and snapped a photo of the two of them for the record. *What's Kaho-chan taking photos for?* I thought. I mean, I do know why. Believe me, I get it.

"This is a huge win for the MaiAji fans," she said.

"Wait, what're the MaiAji fans?" I whispered, quietly so that the good vibes crew in front of us wouldn't hear.

"Ever since school began, the MaiAji fans and the MaiSatsu fans have been fighting back and forth in an underground war," Kaho-chan whispered back.

"That's weird as hell! They're all girls."

Kaho-chan, who'd sounded like she was reading out of a history book, suddenly turned perfectly sincere. "Well, most of the hot boys at

school already have girlfriends. So, there you go."

"But, I mean…" Sure, we'd bestowed the title of supadari upon Mai, but she was definitely a girl. The super glamorous princess type, if anything. Why did people ship her with other girls?

Meanwhile, Mai and Ajisai-san smiled at each other like a couple of childhood friends who were reuniting years later at some high society ball.

"I'm afraid I don't have many friends who talk to me like equals," Mai said. "It's such a relief, Ajisai, that we have none of that silly pretension. I hope we'll be friends forever."

"Oh, I'm so glad to hear that," Ajisai-san said. "It also makes me delighted to have such a lovely friend as you, Mai."

"The pleasure is all mine, Ajisai."

God, they were so meant to be. I couldn't help but wonder if they were literally a match made in heaven.

Was I just imagining things, or was Mai getting a protagonist character arc right now? If Mai was the main character, then who was her love interest: Ajisai-san or Satsuki-san? Kaho-chan was an unlikely candidate too, or Mai could also end up with someone I hadn't met yet, I figured. I, of course, took the role of the protagonist's best friend. Her very best friend in the whole wide world… Oof, talk about a lot of pressure. That was a big responsibility.

At any rate, I comported myself like the most genteel patron at the MaiAji show that was happening before my very eyes, not interrupting a thing. And then Kaho-chan brazenly raised her hand and said, "Okie-dokie, artichokies! I wanna hear what Aa-chan told Mai-Mai to do!"

Kaho-chan was incredible. She could butt into anything. People probably didn't get annoyed with her—well, because of her personality, sure, but also because she was a pro at choosing the right time to interrupt. That was major hard mode for me, and she pulled it off like it was nothing.

"Well, you see…" Mai threw a considerate glance at Ajisai-san.

Ajisai-san clutched her hands to her chest nervously and admitted, "Um, well, I really like Mai-chan and Satsuki-chan both, you know. So it makes me feel kinda sad when I see them treating each other like strangers. And so I told that to Mai, that's all."

Her eyebrows made an upside-down letter u, and she smiled a little, bashful grin. “I’m just being selfish, really. I’m asking too much of you, Mai-chan.”

Up until now, I’d only ever seen Ajisai-san demanding to have her way at home or when we were alone together. I never expected her to talk about being selfish at school. Ajisai-san got tons and tons of attention for being so popular, and she got along well with both Mai and Satsuki-san even when they were fighting. That meant she had absolutely zero need to stick her neck out for them. They could have told her to buzz off or mind her own beeswax, but she still had the courage to do it anyway—not like me, who only acted when necessity forced my hand. I’d die otherwise. She was really, really a genuinely nice person.

“Rena-chan?” she asked. “Are you okay?”

“Huh?” I realized I was staring at her and hurried to look away.

I was actually moved, almost to the point of tears. I guess there really were folks out there who’d let themselves get hurt for the sake of other people. Ajisai-san was one of them. I’d always thought she was great, but she was so stupendously, tremendously better than I’d ever given her credit for. It wasn’t merely that she was cute and sweet; she was also such a strong and noble person.

“What’s going on?” she asked.

“Oh, nothing… You’re just too great, Sena-senpai…”

“Wait, why are you calling me senpai?”

Because I just couldn’t contain the sheer respect… *Thank you, god, for sending Ajisai-san to Ashigaya High School. Thank you. Let me pray to you…*

Before I started blubbering tears of admiration, Mai picked up the thread of the story. “And there you have it, Kaho. I wasn’t at all thinking about how my behavior might be making other people feel. I especially hadn’t realized I was making a dear friend feel so sad until Ajisai told me.”

“Oh, no, I should be the one thanking you,” Ajisai-san insisted. “If you’d come up to me like that, I doubt I would have actually sat down and talked it out with you. I think that makes you really mature, Mai.”

Mai chuckled. “You’ll make me blush.”

But it sounded like Ajisai-san, for all her many merits, didn’t know who Mai was deep down. Mai was pretty much the exact opposite of mature.

I watched Mai and Ajisai-san make googly eyes at each other for a few moments before Mai said, “And that’s that,” and abruptly changed the subject.

“I have a favor to ask.” She looked at me. “I’d like you to be our witness, Renako, because I’m afraid that if I talk to Satsuki-san alone, we’ll resort to arguing again. I apologize, since I know it’ll cost you a lot of time and trouble. But would you be so kind?”

Hmm, hmm, an interesting idea… Wait, what?! I suddenly realized the conversation had turned to me, and my brain momentarily

froze.

"Why me?" I asked.

"Are you sure you really want me to answer that?" She giggled with a smug little grin. Nope, nope, nope. It was because I knew exactly why their fight got started in the first place, right?

"Because Mai-Mai's a big fan!" Kaho-chan exclaimed.

"*Exactement*," Mai agreed.

Kaho-chan raised both hands in the air in celebration of her win on this Oduka Mai-hosted quiz bowl. Wait. I mean, that might have been an accurate summary, sure, but wasn't that leaving just a bit too much on the cutting room floor?

"What say you, Renako?" Mai asked. "Is it too much to ask?"

"W-well, uh…"

I had zero confidence that I could properly mediate them. Even if I hadn't made any of my great escapes recently, I was still the kind of girl who occasionally fled to the roof and hid there. So there was no freaking way I could provide them with backup, hands down. *And first of all, they should figure out their own stuff!* I thought. Besides, even if they didn't talk now, the plan was for them to patch things up in a week anyway… But…

"If it'll be too challenging for you, we won't force you," Ajisai-san said, smiling sweetly.

She had made an opportunity for me, and even I could figure out that I shouldn't let it go to waste. Ugh, but could I at least take Kaho-chan with me?

I looked in her direction, eyes pleading for help, whereupon Kaho-chan placed a hand on my shoulder and quietly shook her head. *That's not my job*, her eyes seemed to say.

"That's not my job," her...well, mouth, actually said.

For a socially awkward person like me, it was a godsend to have someone like Kaho-chan who never asked me to read her mind and just told me everything straight-out. She was a perfect lesson in why it was so important to communicate clearly. Bah!

The pretty girls' stares jabbed at me. *I'm really, really not cut out for this, guys!* I thought. But Ajisai-san had done her best, and even Mai

had decided to talk things out. So now it was my turn.

I thumped my chest wearily. “Okay…” I sighed. “Leave Mai-san and Satsuki-san to me, guys. I’ll…figure it out somehow, I guess.”

I tried to stop the food in my stomach from making its way back up and out as I spoke. I also tried smiling, but I think I ended up looking like a zombie.

But how on earth was Satsuki-san going to take it, I wondered? Fortunately, it seemed like Ajisai-san had asked her about it ahead of time too. When faced with Ajisai-san, I supposed even Satsuki-san had to go, “I can’t say no…” and reluctantly agree to do what she asked. That was good. The fact that the two had a chance to talk was also a good thing.

…I mean, I understood it on a logical basis. Yes, Satsuki-san had agreed to go back to normal at the end of two weeks, but that meant she’d be the only one making concessions and one-sided compromises, just like she always did. It’d be best if Mai actually regretted her actions and apologized. But! I had to play witness to this event. Me! Not Ajisai-san!

I didn’t even know where to begin mediating a relationship. *Come on, Satsuki-san, I thought, please ignore me and figure it out for yourself. I’ll be cheering you on from the sidelines.* 5, 6, 7, 8, who do we appreciate? Satsuki-san! Satsuki-san!

“No,” Satsuki-san said, “I’d prefer you don’t do anything that obnoxious.”

“Okay,” I said.

It was after school, and the time of the showdown had finally arrived. Satsuki-san and I were killing time just outside the school gates, waiting for Mai to show up. She’d told us she’d meet us here.

“But this is like an end of term final for people skills,” I added.

Uh-huh. It was time for me to use everything I’d picked up from my time among the extroverts: the stomachaches, the dizziness, the sudden mid-conversation urges to flee to a world where literally no one knew me.

Okay, yeah, there was no freaking way I could pull this off!

"You'll be fine, Amaori," Satsuki-san said, trying to cheer me up with what she must have thought was a kind smile. "All you have to do is be there for me. That'll give me enough courage on its own."

"Are you sure?" I asked.

"Yes, of course. You're relaxing, heartwarming. You let me be myself. You'll probably even make me lose three pounds, sleep only four hours a night while getting the rest of a full eight hours, and win a 200 million yen lotto ticket."

"Why are you suddenly an ad from a sketchy shopping site?"

Satsuki-san's cheering-up skills could have used some work.

"Sorry," she said. "I lied."

"No, it's fine. I appreciate the thought."

"I would never buy a lotto ticket. I don't see the point in pinning my hopes on such vague things."

"You mean that part was the lie?!"

When I yelled, Satsuki-san suddenly clicked her tongue, making me jolt.

"At any rate," she said, "it's awfully hot today. Must we really wait out here? I'm afraid we're also attracting an absurd amount of attention."

Students on their way home kept glancing at us as they passed by. Mind you, that was because svelte, black-haired beauty Satsuki-san was lounging with languorous sensuality against the gate.

I laughed and hurriedly tried to change the subject before Satsuki-san got too angry and went home. My job patching up relationships had already begun!

"A-anyway," I said, "she said we would go somewhere quiet. Where do you think that would be? Maybe a good café, you know?"

"You still don't know the first thing about her, do you?" Satsuki-san snickered at me. "I can't imagine she would go anywhere a normal person would think of. This is Mai we're talking about. I'm sure she'll exceed—in a bad way, mind you—all our expectations."

"In a bad way, huh?"

I heard all too well what she was hinting at. Yup, Satsuki-san would definitely know, since she was lifelong president of the Oduka Mai Victims Association.

"Hmm," I pondered. "So maybe it'd be a lounge at a luxury hotel or something."

"You still need to think bigger, Amaori," she said. "You haven't seen anything until you walk into a boardroom meant for thirty people or so at her mother's company. She'll sit down in the executive's chair with a big grin and say, 'What about this? No one can hear us here, can they?'"

"Oh god, that's freaky," I said.

Satsuki-san sighed wistfully. Her hair swayed gently in the light breeze like the wings of a black swan.

"Listen, Amaori," she said. "You can't let every little single thing she does get to you. It'll only make her proud and wonder what she can do next time to give you an even bigger surprise. She'll get too excited, even if she means well."

"N-noted, Senpai!"

"To counter her, you need to be a gray rock. Go with the flow, and no matter what she does to you or where she takes you, simply accept it for what it is."

"You're incredible, Senpai," I told her. "You're an anti-Oduka Mai specialist."

"That I am. I devised this technique in elementary school, and her reaction to my lack of reaction was to come up with even more elaborate schemes to surprise me. Thus, I created a monster that always loves a challenge."

"So…you mean this is all your fault?"

The truth came as a shock. And she'd only accidentally mentioned it. So did this mean that everything (and I mean everything) that had happened to me could all be traced back to Satsuki-san?!

Satsuki-san smiled as if to gloss right over the revelation. "Sorry about that," she said.

"Take responsibility for this, dammit!"

"T-take responsibility…? Don't say that so loudly, not in front of

other people…”

“Nooo! I’m talking about Mai!”

“Well, yes. I am aware,” she said.

“Yeah, and I know that you were joking. I’m starting to get a hang of your sense of humor, you know,” I snapped back.

Satsuki-san frowned for just a second before going “Hmmph.”

As frightening as it was, seeing underneath that perpetually composed expression to learn about some of her real thoughts and feelings made me happy as well.

Then, just as I was wrestling with my mix of emotions, Mai arrived. Well, I say Mai, but I mean a limousine.

“Not another limo,” I groaned. “Now I’m starting to feel like every car in Japan is a limousine.”

“Keep your wits about you, Amaori.”

I should also mention that every limousine I’d seen up to now looked similar, but they’d all been different models. That meant Mai had to have at least three of them. What was she, rich? Yeah, stinking rich.

The limousine pulled to a stop, and the driver got out. She opened the door to the back seat just like it was the grand doorway before a throne room.

Beams of light came pouring out—long, thin strands of blonde hair.

“Sorry about the wait,” Mai said. “Let’s get going.”

She lowered her long legs to the ground and climbed out of the car. Once the students on their way home saw the supadari appear, they squealed in shrill voices. The boys were staring too, I noticed with dread. Oh god. That face, that body, that wallet… She had everything she needed to be a hit in society.

I glanced at Satsuki-san. As Mai’s childhood friend, what on earth did she make of all this? But I couldn’t tell, because she looked perfectly calm and unaffected. Oh yeah, the whole gray rock thing… I reminded myself.

“You’re late,” Satsuki-san informed her.

The pretty driver standing just off to the side bowed her head. “My apologies, Koto-sama.”

“I wasn’t talking to you, Hanatori-san.”

The driver lady giggled. “I know,” she said. “I’m teasing you.”

“…Well, I’m going home, Amaori, so you go ahead and handle the rest.”

But she hadn’t even talked to Mai!

“H-hey, hold the phone!” I said. “There’s no point in me going alone. Hey, hey, come on now! If you go home already, Ajisai-san’s going to be all sad tomorrow. She’ll hide it with a smile and shrug it off, but come on! I don’t want to disappoint her.”

I’d just activated my trap card: Sena Ajisai’s Unhappiness. I was playing my most powerful card right out of the gate.

Satsuki-san went, “Urgh.” She stopped in her tracks looking deeply upset. “The longer I live, the more fetters I’m bound by… It’d be so much easier if I could live alone and never answer to anyone else…”

“I’m not sure what you mean,” Mai said, “but come. Let’s go.”

By way of contrast to utterly depressed Satsuki, Mai beamed, not a single trace of unhappiness marring that sunny smile.

Hanatori-san (who’d been the driver every time, but this was the first time I actually learned her name) opened the door and said, “Here you are, Miss.”

“Th-thank you,” I said.

“Not at all.”

She had such a perfect customer service smile that I couldn’t see a hint of anything else in it but sunny radiance. It was kind of freaky, actually!

I sat down in the back seat (I guess it’s still called that in a limo, right?), and Satsuki-san and I ended up facing Mai. Wait, why didn’t we just talk in here?

But just then, the limo started up and drove away, carrying my naive question with it. I could hear the engine, but there was no swaying at all. Did that speak to Hanatori-san’s driving, or was it some mysterious power of the car?

“Uh…” I said.

Mai flipped through a fashion magazine while Satsuki-san stared out the window. I couldn’t stand the silence, so I raised a timid hand.

“Can I, uh, ask where we’re going?”

Mai chuckled, and I almost groaned.

“Like I said,” she told me, “an appropriate place to talk.”

She propped one arm up on the armrest and rested her chin on it. She looked so good like that that I blushed against my will. Yup, that was none other than the bewitching laugh of a beautiful girl who had good intentions but got all too excited at the thought of causing a surprise.

“See, didn’t I tell you?” Satsuki-san said.

“Yup. She’s exceeding my expectations in a bad way, all right…” I muttered.

Sitting across from us, Mai tilted her head in confusion.

Where even were we? Now I understood what Satsuki-san meant all too freaking well. She’d dragged us to a ryoutei, the kind of luxury traditional Japanese restaurant you couldn’t even get inside without a referral. It was in the ritzy Ginza neighborhood.

The limousine drew up alongside the ryoutei, and when we got out, we were let in with nothing more than an acknowledgment of Mai’s name. The entrance looked like a traditional Japanese inn. We removed our shoes there and walked down a long, twisting hallway that seemed to be leading to another world. What it actually led to was a traditional Japanese-style room I’d only ever seen the likes of on TV, with hanging scrolls on the walls. I expected to hear the clack of a shishiodoshi, one of those moving bamboo water fountains, any moment. Considering that I lived a life where I’d never even jokingly think, “Oh, yes, let’s go to a ryoutei in Ginza,” I figured this would be my first and last experience with one.

We were brought tea, and Mai lifted a cup to her lips smugly. “This is quiet,” she said, “and no one can hear us here. Isn’t this the perfect place to talk? I’m positive I haven’t messed it up this time.”

“This is way too extra for high school girls,” I said. “This is the kind of privacy politicians need for, you know, top-secret conversations and stuff…”

I mean, yes, it did fulfill our goal. But it was like if someone went, “Man, I could really go for something sweet right now” and she’d trundled in a cart with a whole freaking wedding cake on it!

“And what good timing,” Mai said. “Why don’t we have dinner together? The fare here is excellent.”

“Yeah, no shit, Sherlock! This is a luxury restaurant!”

“That doesn’t mean it’s necessarily good, Renako,” Mai lectured me. “Some so-called ryoutei let their names do all the talking and hardly put in any effort. What is the world coming to these days? At any rate, this ryoutei is the real deal.”

“Really? Well, gee, sorry for not knowing! Wait, why am I even apologizing in the first place?”

Eyes glinting and with a triumphant smirk on her face, Mai said, “Well, never mind that,” and looked away slightly. “I promised the other day that I’d treat you to a delicious meal, and I wasn’t able to honor that. I’ve been wondering about how to make that up to you, and so I thought… Well, this is a quiet place, and there aren’t any people around, now are there?”

“Uh.”

Mai smiled at me rather weakly, and my brain automatically scrambled itself. I mean, yes, a private luxury restaurant was quiet, and it had a population density of basically zero. It was a place a recluse like me could withstand without running to barricade herself in the restroom. But never in my wildest dreams had I expected Mai to seriously regret the party incident as much as she apparently did. It was so admirable of her that I was at an immediate loss. Because, I mean, this was so nice of her, you know? And that made me happy.

As I sat there befuddled, Satsuki-san, sitting next to me, quietly raised her hand. “I’m good, thank you,” she said. “I have food at home. If you want to eat, feel free to do so after we’re done.”

“Okay,” Mai said. “Renako, would you join me in a meal for two, then?”

“Um… W-well, I mean…”

I nodded like a metal doll as I broke out into a cold sweat. Hello, sudden emergency warning!

While I took the time to sort out my mental state, would you mind

if I clued you into why I was panicking? Sweet, thanks! So, if wonderful, hardworking Satsuki-san left early, did that mean I of all people got to have dinner at this freaking awesome restaurant just because, what, Mai liked me? No freaking way! I couldn't handle that! But then again, hadn't Mai gone to all the effort of setting this up for me? And I couldn't exactly turn down invitations, right?

My heart was being yanked in three different directions, and even though I felt like it would be ripped apart any second, I decided to say okay.

But then Mai noticed something, went "Ahh," and looked down at her teacup.

"No, it's fine," she said. "You don't have to." She looked back up and smiled. "I can make many more opportunities for us to eat together, can't I? I wasn't trying to confuse the purpose of this meeting. We came here to talk today, didn't we?"

My heart! Hurt like crazy! Why on earth was she being so kind to me? *Oh, Mai, Mai, I'm betraying you…* I thought. *I'm betraying you by dating Satsuki-san…*

Oh, crap. They hadn't even started talking, and I was already about ready to die of guilt.

"Before all this," Satsuki-san cut in as I withered away in the background, "you had something you wanted to talk about with me, didn't you? Please, go ahead."

"Very well. Then I shall." Mai looked utterly relaxed. "By the way, how are you liking the new job? I imagine it's difficult."

"Not at all," Satsuki-san said. "And they even give me a discount on donuts."

"I've been in the workforce longer than you, so if you ever run into any trouble, don't hesitate to ask."

Huh, I guess Mai knew Satsuki-san worked part-time. Well, whatever. But wait, had Mai actually been working for longer? What was a rich girl like her doing working…? Oh, duh, she'd been a model for ages.

"In the workforce?" I repeated. "What, so you're a career woman now?"

A bronze statue of a lady in a suit, the ubiquitous mental image

called up when high schoolers pictured an adult in the workforce, was shattered into teeny-tiny bits and replaced with a golden statute of Oduka Mai.

Mai chuckled. “That’s right, Renako. Whenever you and I went out together, I was using my hard-earned money. Normally I’m too busy with school and work to have much free time to spend it, so don’t worry about me using it on you. I’m always happy to financially support you.”

I could feel Satsuki-san’s immediate look of derision. “Amaori, don’t tell me you’re her suga—”

“No, no, no! You have the wrong idea. Wrooong idea! I’ve never begged Mai for money, not once! She just chooses to use it completely voluntarily! Don’t try to frame me for this. I refuse!”

I formed a big X with my arms.

“Anyway, come on!” I snapped, urging on the other two. “Talk already!”

“Oh, right,” said Mai. “Uh, well then, Satsuki.”

She smiled and composed herself. Her eyes suddenly took on a serious cast. Mai’s usual demeanor was pretty gentle, like a sheep with golden fleece, but she came across as a totally different person when she looked this grave. She was a noble goddess of light that no darkness could tarnish.

I zipped my lips, not wanting to get in their way at all.

“I think,” Mai said, “that I’ve done something to hurt your feelings again.”

Oh snap, this seemed promising.

Satsuki-san looked away. “Not really,” she muttered.

I guess it’d be too easy to go, “Yeah, you did.” Girls, I tell you. Especially when she was up against Mai, Satsuki-san’s stubbornness made diamonds look soft.

“You never change,” Mai said. “You never, ever tell me what I’ve done wrong. Maybe it isn’t fair for me to say this, but I promise this isn’t what I want either.”

“…Seems like you get what you want often enough,” Satsuki-san grumbled.

“And if that makes you mad, I don’t blame you. But if you’re mad

about something else, then I think that's uncalled for. I'm sure I could do better if you'd just tell me what's wrong."

Satsuki-san mumbled the word, "Well," and then stopped. I could tell it was one of those things where she wanted to talk, but she couldn't. Her face was saying it all.

Now Mai was being the logical one. It was a complete role reversal of how things usually went in class.

"This particular spat is dragging on especially long," Mai said. "Normally, you'd make that 'well, so be it' face of yours and go back to your usual self after three days. You must be furious. I'd greatly appreciate it if you'd just talk to me."

"I already told you, nothing's going on," Satsuki-san huffed. No matter how much Mai wheedled, Satsuki-san still wouldn't be up-front with her.

I couldn't just sit there and watch, so my mouth opened on its own. "U-uh, Mai. It's about that time you insisted Satsuki-san likes y—oof!"

Satsuki-san jabbed me in the side.

"Well, you weren't saying anything!" I protested, clutching my ribs.

"Don't let her know she's a bee in my bonnet! Or else she'll start steamrollering over me and never stop! I don't even have a grudge against her to begin with, so there!"

"Huh?"

No freaking way was that last bit true.

When I looked back at her in clear denial, she turned bright red. "You know what?" she yelled. "While we're here, I want to clear something up so you can get it through your head already!"

She was fired up. She pointed a finger at Mai, squeezed her eyes shut, and yelled, "For your information, I don't even like you!"

"That's, like, disturbingly similar to what you'd say to a crush…" I muttered to myself.

Satsuki-san's sharp ears caught it anyway. "Be quiet, Amaori!"

I trembled like a leaf.

Her fearsome eyes slid away from me and rounded on Mai. “And why did you even think I liked you to begin with? Tell me your reasoning. Come on, out with it.”

“What, do I need to list every little thing?” Mai asked. “We’ve spent so much time together ever since we were little. I understand your feelings like they’re second nature.” She put a hand to her chest and nodded to herself.

Satsuki-san recoiled. “F-feelings, you say?”

“You fly down my throat about every little thing. You’re just like an elementary school boy. Believe me, I’m fully aware of what it’s like to want to pester the person you like.”

Th-there she went again! Her Royal Highness Oduka Mai, Princess of Positivity! The world through her eyes must have been too bright and sparkly.

“What on earth…?” Satsuki-san said. “I’ve never pestered you.”

“Oh, yes, you have. Even now, it’s a bother to determine how I can make up with you so that Ajisai, Kaho, and Renako will be happy.”

“Listen, I’m in high school now,” Satsuki-san insisted. “I wouldn’t resort to such childish behavior.”

“Oh!” I cried. I clapped my hands. “I get it! Satsuki-san likes Mai, so she got me involved to bother M—oof!”

Another sharp pain stabbed my side.

“I’m all grown up now,” Satsuki asserted. “Physically and emotionally, I mean.”

“I don’t think you’ve changed a bit since we first met,” Mai shot back. I could feel the brutality in those words.

“Wh-what are you talking about?” Satsuki-san spluttered.

Honestly, I didn’t think Mai had a good eye for judging other people. That was pretty clear from the fact that she thought I was destined to be with her. But even so, Mai always tried to see people for who they really were. Maybe that was the flip side of her worrying about no one being able to see who she was beyond the role of supadari Oduka Mai. Mai treated others the way she liked to be treated, and with her good personality, it was no wonder everyone liked her. But what if she ran into someone for whom all her affectation and pretension didn’t

fly, no matter what? That would be a completely different story. In my opinion, Mai and Satsuki-san were just fundamentally incompatible.

Satsuki-san was so shaken up after being told she was the same as ever that she was at a loss for words. "…No way," she said. "How could you say something like that…?"

Every day before riding into battle, Satsuki-san donned a certain armor—the goal of wanting to be a certain way. What did all that effort look like from Mai's perspective? Just imagining it frightened me a bit. Maybe Mai couldn't see the point in Satsuki-san working so hard to make herself look strong. Maybe she even pitied her for it, like if Satsuki-san were putting on a little extra weight… Nah, I think that last bit was only my wild imagination.

Then Satsuki-san yelled, like all the resentment pent up within her was erupting, "And what about you, huh?!"

"What do you mean?"

"You think you've grown? Only physically! The moment anything you don't like happens, you bawl like a baby!"

"I don't—"

"Maybe you think you've grown up, but you're still always bothering everyone around you! On the inside, you're just the same little girl from elementary school!"

I figured Satsuki-san had just attacked the one part of Mai that she didn't want anyone to see—the same way Mai always did to her. But compared to Mai, who did it without intending any harm, Satsuki-san clearly meant for her words to be a dangerous weapon.

Sure enough, Mai's voice sounded upset when she responded, "But this has nothing to do with our current issue, does it? Oh, I see now. You must have told Renako all about that. I suppose it was careless of me to have talked her up so much."

"Careless is the right word. You've been careless with me for years now. You're always careless! Where other people would hesitate, you say, 'It'll be fine since I'm the one doing it,' and march in with your baseless confidence. That's why you get hurt. Isn't that what happened when you made Amaori mad?"

That stabbed deeper into Mai. Her eyes narrowed. "…That was my mistake," she said. "And I recognize my error. But that's why, even

now, I'm trying to do the right thing."

"Oh, how noble of you," Satsuki-san jeered. "Here, let's let your girlfriend see the fruit of your labors, shall we? All right, Amaori, the next time you come over to my house, I know what we can do. We can dig up probably ten or twenty photos of Mai sobbing over her many fiascoes."

"H-huh…?" I said. I couldn't imagine Mai crying at all. And yeah, I definitely did want to see that, but I mean…

Just then, Mai slammed her hands down on the table. Eep. Her patience had finally snapped.

"Why are you bringing Renako into this?" she yelled. "You really are nasty, do you know that?"

"Oh, so you're forgetting the kindness I showed in keeping you company when you cried until 5:30 in the morning, is that it? I guess you must be so used to kindness by now that it doesn't mean anything! This is why I hate you!"

"And the fact that you act like I owe you for it is why I can't stand you either! If you were going to hold it over my head to begin with, then I wish you'd simply told me no right from the start!"

"I'm calling your bluff. You wouldn't have had anywhere else to go if I'd told you no."

"Yes, I would have!" Mai insisted.

Oh god, they were starting to fight…

As I quivered on the sidelines, Mai turned to me and grabbed my arm. Hello?

"Because I have the girl I love with all my heart," she insisted. "And from now on, I'll rely on Renako."

"Huh?!"

Mai smiled at me blissfully, and then turned to Satsuki-san as if flaunting our relationship.

"So thank you for everything you've done, Satsuki," Mai said. "From now on, I'll have Renako. She and I will walk our lives together. Come, Renako, let's get married."

"Let's not!"

Excuse me, was she really trying to slip that in there and hope I wouldn't notice? Also, hold on, this was the very same girl who'd been so determined to hide her tears from me back at the pool. I couldn't picture her as the type to be open about crying in front of her girlfriend. This was nothing more than retaliation for Satsuki-san riling her up. It'd laid bare her competitive streak.

But Satsuki-san screwed up her face. "Thank you?" she repeated. "For what I've done?"

I could feel the resentment from where I sat, her anger that this was all she got for putting up with Mai for so long. To her, it must have felt like she was being paid back with a slap in the face.

A shiver ran down my spine. What was going on? O-oh god. I didn't know what was about to happen, but I felt like if I stuck around any longer, I was going to get involved in something really bad.

Oh god, my stomach was starting to ache, or at least it felt like it! My junior high trauma resurfaced. This was the phenomenon where, once I had decided it hurt, my stomach would actually begin hurting. I had a track record of using this on many occasions to get out of class. *Okay, off to the restroom*, I thought.

As I was about to get up, a giggle made me stop in my tracks. I looked over, and Satsuki-san was grinning a smile that looked like a crescent moon. Oh god. She grabbed my wrist in an iron grip. I felt like I was trying to climb a thread of spider silk, and she was a lich dragging me down.

"How comical," she said. "In that case, you are on your own, Oduka Mai."

"…What do you mean by that?" Mai asked.

Oh jeez, I thought. *Oh god.*

"I suppose it's time we fill you in too," Satsuki-san smirked.

"Amaori and I are dating!"

Ka-blam! Satsuki-san's coming out was so loud you could hear it through the whole restaurant.

Oh god! I thought again. I folded in on myself and squeezed my

eyes shut, but no reaction came from Mai. When I gingerly opened my eyes, I saw Mai blinking hers repeatedly.

"What are you talking about?" she asked.

It was like she couldn't believe it at all. Oh, well, that was fair. To anyone who knew us, the idea of us dating was patently absurd. If we told Ajisai-san or Kaho-chan… Okay, maybe not Kaho-chan. She had some weird abilities, so who knows how she'd take it. But Ajisai-san for sure—she wouldn't have believed us.

"Stop with the unfunny jokes, Satsuki," Mai said, stroking her hair and smiling. "If you want to compare the two of us, we both know there's no one who would ever pick you over me."

That may be true, I had to admit, but… *Uh, Mai, you're being a little conceited, don't you think?*

But then Satsuki-san thrust her phone at Mai.

"Here's a photo of us kissing," she said. "For proof."

"Preposterous!" Mai cried.

She looked at the screen and then fell over backwards. Mai!

On that screen, clear as day, was that night when Satsuki-san and I had kissed.

"Whoa, whoa, whoa!" I yelled. "How did you even get that, Satsuki-san?!"

"I was afraid something could happen, as it did, so I had the camera ready just in case."

This freaking girl! She was too cunning for her own good! Also, having anyone, even a friend, see me kiss someone else was so embarrassing my brain felt like it was about to boil over. Nah, actually, before all that, we had a bigger issue!

"Don't show her that!" I said.

"Why not?"

"Because it'll give Mai the wrong idea, duh?!"

I screamed at her with everything I had, but Satsuki-san didn't look even the slightest bit ruffled.

"What wrong idea?" she asked.

She laid her hands on my cheek. Oh god. They were warm, letting

me know how excited she was. She peered at me with her wildly beautiful face and gave me this masterpiece of a smile.

“We’re exactly like what you see in the photo. Say, how about we continue where we left off right here and now?” she suggested.

If this had been two weeks ago, I probably would have been so overwhelmed by her I wouldn’t have been able to do anything but turn bright red and gape like a fish.

But I was different now. I threw her hands off and jabbed a finger at her. “What happened to all that embarrassment from before, huh?!”

Satsuki-san immediately started blushing. “W-well, of course I was embarrassed,” she stammered. “Because it was our first time.”

“O-okay, then it doesn’t count! Because we were both half-asleep.”

“You’re the only one who keeps insisting that it doesn’t count.”

“But come on, I literally can’t handle this! There’s no freaking way,” I said. “I can’t stand the fact that I stole the first kiss of such a beautiful person.”

“And I keep saying that it doesn’t matter. It’s not like I have a list of requirements for a first kiss! I’m just upset you’re acting like it never happened.”

Mai gazed at us blankly while we carried on our seemingly serious argument.

“This can’t be…” she muttered. “Will I truly fall here? To Satsuki?” She sounded like a final boss in an RPG.

“Wait, no, Mai! She was just trying to get under your skin, so it was originally supposed to be on the cheek. This was an accident, that’s all! So it’s not what it looks like, I swear.”

“What’s not what it looks like?” Satsuki-san asked.

She came up and hugged me from behind. Hey now! I couldn’t shake her off, because she was too strong.

She whispered in my ear like an especially affectionate grim reaper. “If you’ve never kissed me or if you’re not dating me, then you can just tell her, can’t you? Go on, do it. But you can’t, can you?”

The room was otherwise dead silent, making her voice ring even louder.

Mai’s eyes widened. “You’re…dating?” she repeated.

The desperation in her pose was all too plain for me to see. “N-nooo…” I whined. “That’s not true. It’s just for two weeks, that’s all…”

“That’s right. But that’s still dating, isn’t it?” Satsuki-san asked.

“Renako…” said Mai.

I groaned. I was about to be crushed flat between Satsuki-san, Mai-san, and my own regret. How on earth did I end up here?

But I should have known from the start. I should have realized that going out with Satsuki-san would hurt Mai. I’d been so preoccupied with thoughts of fixing their friendship that I hadn’t considered at all what would happen after that. There had to have been tons of other ways for them to patch things up. Mai was my dear friend, and I should have treated her better. But I didn’t. It was really, really shitty of me to go out with her childhood friend and not tell her anything.

Mai lifted her head weakly. Between the part in her hair, I could see myself reflected in her damp eyes. If Mai had chosen then to be like, “But I thought we were friends,” I might never have recovered.

But instead she asked, “Why, Renako…? Why would you cheat on me while you have me as your girlfriend?”

“We’re friends! Friends, I tell you! Friends with Rena-fits! Not girlfriends!”

Seriously? She thought we were dating? Since when had she decided to go and forget everything?

"And you told me!" I went on. "You said I should let Satsuki-san do whatever she wanted. Well, this is the result!"

"I see now," she said. "Were you testing me back then? I wanted to stop you so badly, I felt like my heart was going to rip out of my chest. But I let you go anyway…"

"Jeez!" I yelled, quickly. "Stop making me out to be the kind of girl who cheats in order to test her partner's feelings!"

I felt really bad for putting all the blame on her, but I mean, it was due to her encouragement that I'd gone along with this in the first place.

"Listen, Mai," I snapped. "Weren't you the one who said it didn't matter so long as I came back to you in the end?"

"Then does that mean your heart is still mine…?"

"My heart belongs to me, thank you very much!"

As Mai knelt in front of us, looking crushed, Satsuki-san made a big show of hugging my waist. "Perfect," Satsuki-san said. "This is exactly what I wanted to see."

She cackled—an evil leader moments before dealing the finishing blow to a magical girl.

"Yes, this is what I've longed to witness!" she yelled. "The sight of you groveling on the ground before me! Aaah, this feels perfect. Today's my new birthday, because as of now, my life is complete!"

She roared with laughter, all the while leveling that smile of supremacy. Oh god, what was I supposed to do in this hellish situation? *I'm sorry*, Ajisai-san, I thought. *With my subpar communication skills, there's just nothing I can do…* I'm sorry I couldn't be of any help…

As Satsuki-san gloated in triumph, Mai spoke up. "…Wait a minute, Satsuki. You said a moment ago that you and Renako are only dating for two weeks. What's going to happen after that?"

"Good question," Satsuki-san said. "I did originally intend to stop, but I've been having such fun. I might not be opposed to keeping it up even after the brief Amaori era."

Huh?! *Wait, hold the phone, Satsuki-san!* I thought. That wasn't

what we promised. Besides, this was all to help the two of them make up. Of course, after that victory speech, it wasn't like Satsuki-san could go "Oh, well, two weeks are up, so let's go back to normal, Mai." Yeah, that wasn't happening.

"What, are you going to marry her?" Mai challenged.

"Since you mentioned it," said Satsuki-san, "I think I will."

"No, you won't!" I snapped.

Don't get married just to get revenge on someone else, Koto Satsuki! I mentally berated her.

Finally, Mai regained a bit of her composure. "Well, in that case," she said, "then I'll still have plenty of chances. Please, I'm hardly so mediocre that I'd give up after a single taste of defeat."

"Hmph," Satsuki-san said. "That's gross."

"I'll make her forget all about you, just you wait and see," Mai said. "I'm confident I can pull off that much, at least."

"You say that, even though I stole her away from you?"

"A long life has many checkpoints, and these things happen sometimes. In fact, now that she's dated you, I'm sure she'll understand the appeal of my charms all the better."

"Hmmph, hmmph, hmmph."

Now that'd she tasted adversity and risen to her feet once more, the light rekindled in Mai's eyes. Ah, yup. Mai never admitted defeat. No matter what I told her, she never gave up and always kept on coming after me anyway. That optimism, above all else, was Mai's biggest strength.

Satsuki-san's face morphed into a snarl that made it hard to believe she was on top of the world just moments before. "Well, so be it," she said.

She ran her hands through her own hair. It seemed like she was so satisfied with defeating Mai once that she hadn't thought about anything beyond that. I'd been realizing recently that Satsuki-san was actually pretty rash… And that rashness was nothing more than a weakness for Mai to exploit.

"Then, Satsuki-san," Mai said. "How about you and I have a competition?"

“A competition, you say?”

“Oh, yes. It’s simple. Right now, Renako and I are still trying to decide if we should be best friends or girlfriends. You can hardly date Renako in peace when I’m still around, now can you?”

Satsuki-san made a blatantly sour face. “True,” she acknowledged. “I’m not eager to walk into a situation where I’d have to devote my resources to defense, to prevent you from using Amaori against me.”

Ouch, there was zero affection in that statement! Okay, if there had been any, that’d be an even bigger issue, but you get the point.

“However,” Satsuki-san admitted, “I hate the fact that you’re the one suggesting this. You just don’t think you’ll lose either way, do you?”

“Of course not,” Mai said. “If I win, you give me Renako back.”

Give me back? I wasn’t Mai’s to begin with!

“I’m going to marry her,” Mai went on, “and raise a happy family with her. I don’t mind how many children we have either, Renako. We can take turns carrying them.”

Unable to take it any longer, I finally spoke up. “Whose children are you even talking about now?!”

Up until now, I hadn’t been a participant in this conversation, but I had the sneaking suspicion that something was looming over the horizon for me, and it was bad. Well, the suspicion was more than just sneaking. Mai and Satsuki-san were both such strong people that a fight between them was as tough as standing in the middle of a hurricane. I didn’t even know how to read the room, so there was no freaking way I could get a word in edgewise. But I didn’t have the time to be wishy-washy. After all, I was the only person here who could stand up for myself.

Satsuki-san quirked an eyebrow and said, “Okay.” Her voice dumped cold water over the flaming hot coals of my temper. “Then if I win, I win Amaori for life.”

“For life?! I’m only in my first year of high school and already someone’s getting me for life?”

Satsuki-san went on like she hadn’t heard me at all, her gaze fixed on Mai.

“That’s right,” she said. “We’ll be right next to you, spending our

lives together in perfect harmony. We'll hold hands, we'll kiss in front of you, and we'll…do, you know, what comes after that."

"All that, right in front of her?" I screamed in frantic (frantic, I tell you!) desperation. "Isn't that kind of messed up?!"

"All right," Mai said. "We'll compete for Renako."

"Good. Let's settle the score," said Satsuki-san.

Sparks flew where Mai and Satsuki-san's eyes met. These freaking girls!

Had I approached this from a stereotypically girly mindset, I would have had a completely different reaction. The school's supadari and the supadari's rival fighting over me? I should have been thrilled! They were both totally out of any normie's league. Mai was a super-rich celebrity and Satsuki-san… Well, her family might have been poor, but she was brilliantly smart and a super hard worker. Her future prospects were exceptional. If I dated either one of them, I'd be set for life. Obviously, Mai had affection for me in spades, and I'm sure Satsuki-san's conscientious personality would make her carry out her wifely duties with plenty of due diligence. All of us being girls aside, shacking up with either one of them would have made life smooth sailing. I felt like a love interest in a play, because I wanted to yell, "Please don't fight over me!" I wanted to bashfully giggle—oh, how hard it was to be so well loved! But I absolutely could not. No freaking way, José!

This was a happy thing. Yeah, a happy thing. But it was the kind of happy thing that made me ditch school and hole up in my room all day playing video games. I hadn't worked my butt off to remake myself for high school just to give up the reins and turn my body over to someone else for their own happiness, dammit!

So I yelled, "Hold the phone, both of you!"

I shoved myself into their line of sight, feeling like I was pushing my way onto a crowded train.

"Renako?" Mai asked.

"What is it now, Amaori?" Satsuki-san said. "We're talking about important business."

"Uh, yeah, you're planning the future course of my life?! Believe me, I'm aware. I could literally not be more aware!"

I steeled myself not to flinch as Satsuki-san glared at me coldly.

Then I yelled, “Anyway, no matter who wins, you guys are taking my freedom! Haven’t I been saying this from the start? There’s no freaking way I can be either of your lovers! What I want is for us to be friends.”

“But, Renako,” Mai said, “weren’t you worried about losing your friendship with me if we ever broke up? I’m prepared to stay with you for life, you know.”

“Me too,” Satsuki-san added.

“Satsuki-san, you’re making a heavy commitment way too easily. No! And besides, there’s no freaking way I can say yes totally out of the blue, so absolutely no! I’m in charge of controlling my own life, even when it comes to picking a partner, okay?”

Of course, I still didn’t actually have the courage to pick said partner, nor did I think a partnership would go well at all. When it came down to it, I was also scared that I would never run into anyone apart from these two who would ever have feelings for me. Believe me, that was definitely a concern. But hey, oh well! It was still technically possible, and I’d just have to bank on that possibility for now.

“So, listen up!” I said.

I thrust my arms out like I was T-posing.

And I screamed, “Count me in! I’m going to be a part of this competition too!”

The two were both, of course, utterly shocked.

“What?” Satsuki-san said.

“I beg your pardon?” Mai asked.

Goddammit, stop treating me like I’m set dressing here! I thought.

My inner jerkwad soul flared up in anger at this pair of self-absorbed girls. Maybe social relationships weren’t my cup of tea, maybe I was a sniveling coward, but under the power of rage you bet your butt I could get this done.

“What?!” I snapped. “You can’t exactly say I don’t have a dog in this fight, huh?”

I scowled at both Mai and Satsuki-san in turn.

“I never expected that you’d want to join in as well, but I don’t see why not,” Mai said.

“I don’t have any objections, of course,” said Satsuki-san.

Mai put a hand to her chin with a thoughtful hmm. “Well, this actually works out nicely,” she said. “Why don’t we settle it with the midterms we have next week?”

“That suits me just fine,” Satsuki-san agreed. “I’m going to leave you in the dust.”

“Wait!” I yelped, sounding rather more upset than I had intended.

Satsuki-san gave me a quiet grin. “Well, it looks like the time has already come for you to show us the fruits of your labor, Amaori,” she said. “Remember all the studying we did earlier in the story? That was foreshadowing. Believe me, you’ll have no end of competition. Good luck.”

“You can’t just send a level 1 adventurer into the halls of the demon king!” I protested. “Aren’t you both always first and second in the class ranks?”

Satsuki-san had been the one to teach me how to study to begin with. She was basically my mentor. That meant she more or less knew how much (or how little) I was capable of.

“But, Renako, you’ve managed to make me enamored of you,” Mai said. “So I’m sure you must have wonderful potential. If you tried, you could overcome even my scores.”

“Uh, I actually score below average, but okay.”

I was willing to reveal my shame to Mai who, for some reason, kept beaming away at me. God, I’d yelled too much. My throat was going to be so dead the next day. But if I didn’t hold my ground, I wasn’t even going to make it to the next day!

“Hey, you should let me decide the terms of the contest,” I insisted. “It’s my life on the line, so I figure I have the right to choose, don’t I?”

I mean, it was only fair, if I did say so myself.

But then Mai just straight-up went, “No, I don’t think so.”

Hey, what? Ow… I’d been barreling ahead on momentum, so I ran out of steam the minute she stopped me. I guess a paper plane launched from a school roof really couldn’t go that far.

Mai looked away from me, her cheeks red. “If you win, you could

ask for me to devote my life entirely to you. That would make it the same level of risk for the both of us."

"But I won't ask for that, so calm down."

"What, so you'd ask to be with Satsuki after all?"

"No!"

I already knew what my winning conditions would be. After all, what did we even come here for today? Who had set up this meeting for us? Uh-huh, yeah. We'd done it all so we could have a nice, peaceful, stress-free environment at school. I'd done it all to live up to the hopes that Ajisai-san had pinned on me!

"If I win," I said, "then I want you guys to go back to normal and be friends in the same friend group. And I want you to actually make up and work things out."

Mai and Satsuki-san both looked at each other, frowned, and went, "Hmmph." Well, I'd already known they were going to hate it. *But come on, guys! I'm staking my life on it, so get with the program!* I thought.

Satsuki-san was the first to agree. "Oh, fine, I suppose," she said. "At the very least, it'll make it easier to talk to the girls."

Satsuki-san had a 1-in-3 chance of beating Mai completely—not bad odds at all. And if I won, she'd still only be going through with what she'd planned to do in the first place.

Meanwhile, Mai nodded once she saw Satsuki-san's acquiescence. "That's fine by me," she said. "So then, what will we be competing in?"

Wasn't it obvious? Using my phone, I brought up an image and showed them. They both peered at it.

I announced triumphantly, "We're playing an FPS! Let's have our match in a first-person shooter game."

Our deadline was the last day of the school term, AKA the end of next week. That gave us seven days to prepare. However, we'd be in tests all next week from Monday through Wednesday, so practically speaking, we had way less time. I hadn't wanted to give either of them any time to practice.

"That's not very fair," Satsuki-san said.

"Well, tough titties," I said. "I'm the one who loses by default

anyway."

To be honest, I'd only picked it because it gave me the highest chance of winning.

"So?" I said. "How about it?"

When I looked at Mai to confirm whether or not she agreed, she smiled at me like it was perfectly normal. "I don't mind," she said.

That smile was awfully calm and competent. She seemed to be under the impression that, given a week, she could defeat me. *Mwa ha ha, you've fallen into my trap, Oduka Mai…* I thought.

On the other hand, Satsuki-san looked conflicted. "You're talking about a video game, aren't you?" she said. "I don't have a console."

Well, yeah, that was certainly a problem. It wasn't exactly like she could go out and buy a PS4 just to train for the competition…

But then Mai raised her hand. "Oh, I have a spare," she said. "I can let you borrow it."

"Wait, why do you have two?" I asked her.

"I bought it that one time when I was training to beat you in that fighting game. I was going to ask one of the servants to help me train, but I didn't think it'd work with only one device."

W-wow. Okay. I guess people who thought like that really existed.

"In that case," Satsuki-san said, "I'll take you up on the offer. Thank you."

"Sure," said Mai. "I'll bring a TV over later too."

As I watched the two of them, who were apparently completely serious about this, a line of sweat started to run down my cheek. No, no, no… I'd be fine. I had to be fine. Even if they were both talented geniuses, I wouldn't lose. I absolutely refused to lose. I wasn't just saying that out of stubbornness either. I actually stood a decent chance of winning. After all, I'd picked this because this was the number-one thing I was good at!

"When I win," I said, "you two had better actually make up, okay? I mean it, Mai and Satsuki-san!"

"Of course," Mai said. "Now, on the other hand, if I win…"

"Y-yeah, I know. It's okay! You don't have to spell it out! Believe

me, I get the picture."

"I've never played a video game before," said Satsuki-san. "But I suppose I'll just have to figure it out one way or the other."

Satsuki-san immediately looked up the title on her phone and started reading a strategy guide. That was not the action of someone who'd never played games before! Jeez, this girl was putting herself on the fast track to victory.

I was plenty confident, but, unfortunately, I was also just as terrified of these two and their complete unfathomability.

And thus, our three-way crusade began…with me literally fighting for my life!

In the limousine on the way home, Ajisai-san sent me a message. *So, how'd it go?*

I hesitated for a moment and then typed back, *Sorry, I can't say a lot about it, but it, uh, kind of escalated into a war…*

That bad?!

"So, yeah, that's more or less the long and short of it," I said.

"Uh…" Ajisai-san said. "So let me get this straight. If you beat them in a video game, Mai-chan and Satsuki-chan are going to be friends again?"

"Yup."

It was Saturday afternoon, the day after the restaurant showdown, and I was in my room, on the phone with Ajisai-san. I had the phone hooked up to my wireless headphones so I could have my hands free for my game controller. After our discussion yesterday and before I sent them on their way to start practicing, I'd laid down some regulations (like the map, the kind of weapons we were allowed to use, fighting rules, etc.). I'd tried to make it super fair and to keep it in line with the most standard format of the game. So, on that note, I was running training mode over and over to memorize every nook and cranny of the map.

This second phone call wasn't anywhere near as nerve-racking as

the first. Of course, that was probably because I was so distracted by the game. I also had a clear purpose in calling her, to report on what had gone down with Mai and Satsuki-san. Hey, if you gave me a purpose, even I could make a phone call! I gave out a lame, internal chuckle. Well, I still felt pretty awkward since I hadn't managed to pull off the reconciliation, but oh well.

Naturally, Ajisai-san had a few questions.

"So what happens if Mai-chan or Satsuki-chan win?" she asked.

"Urk." I couldn't respond. I mean, I couldn't exactly say that I had to marry them, you know? Lord only knows how Ajisai-san would take it.

I tried running this by the Ajisai-san who lived in my head.

Renako: Oh, you know, I'd have to marry them. That kind of thing.

Ajisai: Ooh, bummer. I hate when that happens.

Her reaction was so lackluster I couldn't help but feel disappointed.

No, no, no. That wouldn't happen! I told myself. True, Ajisai-san might have given zero shits about me, but I knew she'd flip out over news of either Mai or Satsuki-san getting married.

Redo!

Renako: Uh… Well, to be honest, they said I'd have to marry them.

Ajisai: Wait, you mean you'd marry Mai-chan or Satsuki-chan?! But they're so pretty! Good for you, Rena-chan. I mean, you'll only ever wind up on the low end of average no matter where you go, so this is, like, a legit miracle for you!

"Who asked you?" I snapped.

"Huh, what?" said Ajisai-san. "Where did that come from?"

"Oh, sorry, I wasn't talking to you. The Ajisai-san I was

daydreaming about just said something really rude to me, so I just… You know."

"You daydream about me?! What, does this happen often?"

"Uh, define often…?"

"No way! But why?!"

I'd successfully eliminated my old mental image of blasé Ajisai-san, but the second Ajisai-san spat venom at me even while being all bright and bubbly. If anything, I think her attack stats were higher now…

Anyway, yeah. Imaginary Ajisai-san was right. From appearances alone (we were going to ignore the difficulties of reality for the time being), Mai and Satsuki-san both made for top-tier girlfriends. Was complaining about dating them basically a humblebrag? Yeah, I was better off not saying anything.

"I-if they win," I said. "Uh. Good question… Ha ha, I guess there'll be a penalty or something, I dunno…"

"Ooh, really?" she said. "Okay, then that means you have to win no matter what!"

"Uh-huh, I'm working on it… Believe me, I'm fighting for my life to make it happen…"

"Rena-chan, I'm amazed you're working so hard to help the two of them patch things up… You really are cool…really, really cool."

I felt like I was getting a visit from the angel of guilt.

"Um. Well. Yeah, about that, uh… Anyway, uh, how are we looking for today?"

Since we hadn't been able to play the other day, I meant.

Ajisai-san said, "Oh, sorry. I have to take the kiddos to the park in a bit. Again, sorry about that, Rena-chan."

"Nah, nah, nah, it's fine. Don't worry about it."

I felt awful for making her apologize to me. Just like we all needed to share the wonders of Mother Earth, so too did I need to share the blessings of Ajisai-san's time and attention.

"But, you know," she whispered through the phone, sounding kind of needy, "I do still have a moment…so we can stay on the phone

for longer, I mean."

"Oh, uh, um, o-okay." I giggled weakly. "Yeah, cool, uh…" I giggled again.

This was dangerous territory. I put my hand to my mouth to cover the disgusting grin I made when her oh-so-adorable voice came floating into my ear, even though I knew perfectly well Ajisai-san couldn't see me through the phone.

"So then, um…" I said. "L-let's see, what should we talk about…? Oh, uh, it's been pretty hot lately, huh?"

"Yeah, tell me about it," she said. "Summer break's just around the corner."

I could practically hear her beaming away as she spoke, even though I'd started by whipping out the weather as the first topic of conversation. Me and my cruddy communication skills, huh? Was Ajisai-san, like, a legit angel sent down to keep this poor mortal company? This felt like some sort of training to learn how to handle one-on-one conversations. No matter what topic I chucked at her, she always batted it back. Talk about ultra-easy mode!

Just then, I heard someone call, "Oneechan!" It was my sister, so I ignored her, as one does.

"Are you going anywhere for summer vacation?" I asked.

"I don't know," she said. "I'd like to go hang out at a few spots and all, but I don't think I'll be making any real trips or anything."

Yeah, I guess that would be tricky for her, what with having to take care of her brothers and all.

I heard another "Oneechaaan!" but I let that one sail right by me without acknowledging it. How could one possibly divert their attention to a lesser being when they were in the midst of a conversation with an angel?

"So do you want to come over to my house instead, Rena-chan?" Ajisai-san asked.

"Y-yeah, of course," I said. "I'll bring a ton of games too!"

"Yay, goodie. In that case, I'll bake you a cheesecake. Do you like cake, Rena-chan?"

"Huh?! Y-yeah, I love cake…"

Having Ajisai-san bake me a cake was like winning at life…

Just then, my bedroom door slammed open. “Oneechan!” my sister barked.

“Give me a sec!” I demanded. “Ajisai-san and I are in the middle of something here, okay?”

“Oh, are you now?” said a frosty voice. “Well, I rather think you might want to put me first. I am your girlfriend, aren’t I?”

There stood Satsuki-san, looking like the princess of the moon kingdom.

“Huh?!” I cried.

“Rena-chan?!” Ajisai-san squealed. “Did I just hear someone say ‘girlfriend’? Rena-chan? Rena-chan?!”

“Ah—”

Satsuki-san pulled the phone from my hand and hung up. Th-that was mean…

“What are you doing here…?” I asked.

“I tried to call you, but you wouldn’t pick up,” she said. “Thus, I asked Hanatori-san for your address.”

Satsuki-san dropped an overnight bag on my floor with a thud. She was dressed in her non-school clothes—a long, thin dress—and her hair was loosely braided. She didn’t give off the same aristocratic-lady impression that she did at school; instead, she looked more like a breezy young girl. But it managed not to clash with her personality, and it made her pale, quiet beauty stand out all the more.

“Oneechan,” my sister growled, standing next to her and scowling down on me like I was literal trash. “How come you ignored your girlfriend Satsuki-senpai, huh?”

“Huh?” I said. “U-um, well… I was on the phone with Ajisai-san…?”

I mean, I thought I was ignoring my sister, not Satsuki-san…

My sister clicked her tongue at me. Excuse me?! “Get your life together, Oneechan,” she spat, and then she breezed out, slamming the door shut behind her. The sound was so loud it made me jump.

“…Am I interrupting a fight?” Satsuki-san asked.

“Uh, not really, it’s just kinda… You know.” I laughed awkwardly.

Oh, great. I could just hear my sister’s opinion of me dropping even further. Once this was all over, I really needed to clear some things up for her…

“Oh god,” I moaned. “Now Ajisai-san’s blowing up my phone with messages.”

For now, I figured I’d text her that Satsuki-san came over and had just been making a joke. My life was nothing more than an endless series of lies to the people I cared about. What was I even living for?

“You seem awfully complacent,” Satsuki-san said.

“Huh?” I raised my head. “W-wait a sec, can I ask what you’re doing over at my house in the first place?”

“I wanted to ask you a few things.”

Satsuki-san opened the fasteners on her overnight bag and pulled out a TV screen and a PS4. Hello?! Did she just bring those from her house?

“First, would you practice with me?” she asked.

“S-sure thing.”

She began setting it up, and I stared blankly at her. It still hadn’t sunk in that Satsuki-san was actually here, in my room.

“Oh, Satsuki-san,” I said. “That cable connects in the back.”

She didn’t respond.

“Here, I’ll do it.”

I swapped places with her, since she was moving at a turtle’s pace, and took the HDMI cable. Satsuki-san looked away, her eyes wandering my room for lack of anything better to do.

“Your room’s very neat,” she said.

“Huh? Yeah, uh, I guess.”

I mean, yeah, since my mom cleaned it…

Satsuki-san made a thoughtful sound. “Is this the spot where Mai made a pass at you?”

I involuntarily did a spit-take. “S-Satsuki-san, could you please take a little more care when talking about such a delicate topic?”

“But why? I already know all about it,” she said. “Not to mention, this is what set her off to go and harass me in the first place.”

“I mean, you may be right, but…”

Satsuki-san sat down on my bed and crossed her long legs. From here, I could see her…well, you know…which made me frantically look away.

“I-it’s ready to go now,” I said.

“I can see that. Thank you.”

She turned to me and came closer and closer. This reminded me of when Mai had—you know, gotten real close to me—and my face turned red without any input from my brain.

But, naturally, Satsuki-san moved right on past and picked up the controller. Well, duh! That’s what she’d come here to do, after all—play video games!

“Hmm?” she said. “What’s wrong?”

“N-nothing…”

“What, did you think I’d make a pass at you like Mai did?”

“No!”

Satsuki-san put the controller back down. Chuckling all the while, she leaned forward and got right in my face. What was this all about?

“I must admit,” she said, “I hadn’t considered this before, but I don’t need to take this competition all that seriously. What if I were to convince you that dating me is better than having us make up?”

“Say what now?!”

“…Amaori,” she breathed.

Satsuki-san’s hand brushed my cheek. Her touch laid a sensual pink tinge over my thought processes.

“Hey, whoa, stop that,” I spluttered.

“Now, now. Relax.”

She tucked her hair behind her ear. And then her face came closer and closer.

“Hey, whoa, whoa, no, no, no!”

I squeezed my eyes shut tight. Even though I was frightened

enough to pass out at any minute, I had a pretty good hunch that Satsuki-san was about to pull back and call it a joke just like she always did. So when a gentle, ever-so-slightly moist sensation fluttered against my lips, the shock just about killed me.

My eyes flew wide open. Satsuki-san sat directly in front of me, touching her finger to her lips reflectively. The sight was so beautiful I forgot how to speak.

"Wha-wha-wha…" was all I could manage.

I covered my mouth as I trembled in shock. "W-was that for another proof photo? Who are you trying to menace this time? Ajisai-san? Kaho-chan? O-or even…my sister?!"

"Hush," she said. "I wasn't taking any photos."

She scowled, her eyebrows knitted together in a displeased frown, but Satsuki-san's face also turned as red as if she were wearing rouge.

"I just wanted to check something," she added.

"Wh-what on earth were you checking…?"

My limbs buckled as all the strength went out of them. Exhausted, I collapsed to my knees and stared up at Satsuki-san.

"I detest doing things by halves, so I've been giving someone more thought," Satsuki-san said. "You, that is. I've been considering you."

"Me?" I asked.

"Yes, based on what we've said, you're mine for life, correct?"

"Uh, yeah…?"

"After some careful contemplation," she said, "I think it might have been rather rash of me to choose you as my spouse for the next several decades."

"No, believe me, you don't need careful contemplation to come to that conclusion!"

"I was too focused on my competition with Mai to pay attention to anything else," Satsuki-san said. "Which I was self-reflecting on, and that's where I discovered the problem."

"Eep."

Satsuki-san took my hand and squeezed it tightly. Her middle finger rubbed my skin, as if she wanted to feel what it was made of.

“You once wanted to know how I felt about you, didn’t you?” she asked.

“W-well, I mean…”

Her intense stare upset me to a shameful degree. I’d been thinking that I’d have liked to be her friend. I’d had a lot of fun getting to know her recently, and I’d learned that she truly was a nice person. Did that mean I wanted to take things further? Well, now that she’d asked, I mean…

Unlike Mai, who dragged me along to her alien worlds, Satsuki-san had her feet planted firmly in reality. Even if I became her girlfriend, I honestly didn’t think my life would change all that much. We’d chat at school, then we’d go home and she’d help me with homework. After waiting for her to get off work, I’d go stay at her house, and… And… And she’d show me that really, really cute side of her every so often, the one nobody had ever seen. The mere thought of it nearly made my head explode.

“N-nope!” I said. “I can’t do it! No freaking way! Nooooo freaking way!”

“But I hadn’t even said anything yet,” Satsuki-san pointed out. “Your mind’s in the gutter again, I see.”

“N-no, you don’t get it! I swear, you really have the wrong idea. But I mean, that’s what you get when you start kissing me out of nowhere! You’re the one with her head in the gutter!”

“Say, do you like me?” she asked.

“Y-you’re asking if I like you?”

Forget just Mai—I had too many gorgeous, adorable, smart, socially adept, and attractive girls in my life. Even if I didn’t *like* like them, of course I liked them. Platonically, remember!

“Anyway,” I shouted back, “right back at you! What do you feel about me?”

Just then, the realization hit me. Oh god. What if she said she liked me and then tried to make a pass at me? Then what? Was this going to be Mai 2: The Sequel? I should have watched my words more carefully, but here I was repeating the same mistake!

I thrust my hands out with an internal *Oh god*, and turned away from her so I could see as little of her as possible.

And then Satsuki-san said, “I don’t know.”

“Wait…huh?”

Satsuki-san fiddled with her hair. “To be honest,” she said, “I don’t really know how I feel. Well, so what? After all, this is the first time I’ve ever spent such a long time around someone like you.”

“Someone like me?” I repeated.

“…If I go more in depth, I’m concerned I might hurt your feelings. Would you still like me to answer?”

“Yeah, I’ll be fine…”

“…Well, then.” Satsuki-san hemmed and hawed, like the words were hard to get out. Then she said, “I mean, someone as weird as you.”

What on earth…? She’d just branded me as atypical all over again, despite all my efforts to become the model image of a generic teenage girl.

“I-I’m not weird,” I insisted. “I’m totally normal.”

My slight resistance snapped like twigs as she went on: “A normal person wouldn’t have agreed to date me for two weeks. That’s not to mention that you look ready to die if Mai and I don’t make up. You work too hard just to get through the day, don’t you?”

“Ee!” I said. I couldn’t even get the whole “eep” out.

However, for some reason I couldn’t fathom, Satsuki-san looked happy. “Honestly, you’re so reckless,” she said. “You never think before you act. All the same… I don’t hate that about you.”

“…Satsuki-san?”

“I suppose I’m rather reckless myself,” she admitted. “You know, this game is really quite hard.” She smiled, controller in hand. “I’d like your help in taking down Mai. Would you teach me how to get better? I know you’re still my opponent, of course, but all the same. Would you please?”

“S-sure,” I said.

Why did I agree to it? Satsuki-san was right; she was my opponent, and I really couldn’t afford to give my opponents a helping hand.

When I thought about it, there were a lot of reasons I agreed, but

the biggest one wasn't just that she was my partner in crime in trouncing Mai. Nah, it was a lot simpler than that. It was because Satsuki-san was in my room with me to play video games, and the fact of that alone made me wildly happy.

Yet, with that being said…

"Satsuki-san, you're being shot at! You're being shot at!"

"Huh, what? Oh, am I dead?"

"You have a gun! Why are you punching them?!"

"I can't hit them otherwise."

"Look at your freaking map already! See, you have an enemy approaching! Look! It's in the upper-right corner! Check the map!"

"Oh, that thing? I couldn't figure out which way is which on it, so I've been ignoring it this whole time."

She had a long way to go!

And so, with the two TVs and PS4s side by side, me yelling about four times as much as I ever did, and the sun starting to go down, Satsuki-san produced another ridiculous idea.

"Can I spend the night?" she asked.

She'd brought along a change of clothes and an overnight set in her bag and everything. It was such a sudden proposal, and my face clearly showed that I was reluctant to go, "Duh, of course!" But…

"…I'm not sure how to get better playing alone at home," she admitted. "This is the only night I don't have work, so I was hoping I could use this opportunity to improve a little… Yet I suppose it won't work out, will it?"

When she pulled that meek and quiet act on me, I just didn't know what to do. Of course, this ate into my own practice time, but…I couldn't say no to her. Besides, a (sorta) friend coming over to my house and spending all night with me playing video games? That was

page one in my book of awesome high school experiences!

"Yeah, I getcha…" I sighed. "Let me go ask my mom."

"Okay, thank you. Should I come introduce myself to her?"

"N-nah, you just stay put for now."

I left Satsuki-san in my room and went off to find my mom. At this time of night, she was in the kitchen making dinner.

"Heeey, Mom," I said.

"Whaaat?" she replied.

Fidgeting all the while, I asked, "Hey, can me and a (sorta) friend of mine have a sleepover tonight? I mean, uh, theoretically, if I were to ask that, what would you say?"

It was kind of embarrassing to ask…

Just then, there was a huge clatter, and I lifted my head. My mom had just dropped the measuring cup she'd been using to scoop up the rice.

"H-huh?" I said. "What is it?"

"Renako-chan…" she breathed.

She put both her hands on my shoulders and then pulled me into a tight hug. H-huh…?

"Wait, what's going on?" I asked. "Hello?!"

"Of course it's fine, silly girl," she said. "Please, have her stay over a week, two weeks, I don't care. She's a friend of yours, right, Renako?"

"Uh, yeah."

I mean, she wasn't *per se*… But I could tell that setting my mom straight would make her cry, so I just nodded woodenly.

Overcome with emotion, my mom picked up the measuring cup and looked up at the ceiling in prayer. She sighed in delight. "I haven't made dinner for one of Renako's friends since August 27th in the fifth grade."

"How do you even remember that?!" I yelped, mortified. "That's freaky!"

I mean, I hadn't had so much as been to a friend's house for all three years of junior high, let alone brought anyone over. Mai was the

first friend who'd ever walked in my room to begin with. But still, there was no need to be that elated. My mom had also seen Mai come over (or she should have, mind you), but for some reason, Mai didn't seem to count. I think it was probably like if one day, I had a son and he came home with his "friend," the acclaimed musical artist Yonezu Kenshi. I'd have been like, "Your…friend…?"

"O-okay, anyway, thanks!" I said.

"Don't you worry," Mom said. "I'll work extra hard so your friend will want to come back. Just you leave it to me!"

"You really don't need to go overboard."

At any rate, that's how I ended up sharing an all-out feast with Satsuki-san for dinner. She showed off perfect social graces, just as I'd seen at her job, and totally killed at winning my parents' trust. Mai had been one thing, but this was truly incredible. I had to give her my absolute respect.

But there was one issue: my sister. She bolted down her food, then went "Thanks for dinner!" and hightailed it back to her room. *Urgh. Awkward*, I thought.

"The bath's free now," Satsuki-san said. "Thank you for letting me go first."

"Yeah, sure thing."

She'd brought a bath towel from home that she wound around her hair as she came back to my room. Her pajamas were the same simple T-shirt and shorts combo I'd seen her use before, the ones that showed off a liberal length of her long legs that were normally hidden by a skirt. They were so pale and…long…

She went through the steps of her modest skincare routine and then picked up the controller again. She started up the game without a word and sat down in front of the TV, which had found a home for itself in my room.

"Uh, I'm going to have a bath now too, I guess," I said.

"It's all yours."

All afternoon and evening, she'd been staring at the screen, just taking breaks for the toilet, her bath, and dinner. Now, under my

guidance, she started playing against the CPU on a low difficulty in order to acclimate to the game itself and learn the flow of a match. Besides, it'd also give her the opportunity to get a few wins in. She'd never learn how to win by playing against fellow newbies right off the bat. It was better for her to pick up the basics in a low-difficulty environment first, and I figured she'd gradually start to figure out which weapons she felt most comfortable with.

Satsuki-san was silent as she sat hunched over, hugging her cushion. My heart skipped a beat as I watched her focus. Wait, what?! What was that all about?

Grabbing a change of clothes, I galloped out of the room. Once I'd barricaded myself in the bathroom, I let out a sigh of relief. I washed my body down, then, the minute I was about to climb into the tub, a vile thought crossed my mind. …Satsuki-san had just been in this very tub, right? Nope, nope, nope! I mean, come on, we'd already bathed together and everything! So what the heck, man? I thought.

I plunged in and let the heat melt my agitated heart.

"Man, Satsuki-san…" I mumbled.

I got that she was working hard, of course, I really did. Yet all the same…

"Let's face the facts. She can't beat me in a week…"

It wasn't that Satsuki-san was a sucky gamer, exactly. If anything, she trained super efficiently and focused like a champ. She was also a lot faster at picking things up than I was. Even her work buddies had complimented her on being a fast learner.

It was just that no one was good at a game when they first started, no matter what the title, and that rule definitely held true for first-person shooters. First you learned addition, then you learned subtraction; after that, you memorized your multiplication tables before going on to learn your formulas. You had to get all of that experience in before you could master integration and differentiation.

"If she had at least a month… Nah, even three weeks, then maybe she could have a chance…" I mused.

Then I shook my head. God, what was I going on about? If I lost, I'd have to sacrifice myself to Satsuki-san, wouldn't I?

Right. I couldn't let my guard down just because I'd seen her

determination. I had to bring my A-game to win my freedom. Sure, I'd answer any questions she asked me and I wouldn't lie to her. I'd play things perfectly fair and square. That'd be good enough. *No going beyond that, me!* I reminded myself. *The competitive sphere is tough!*

"Ugh," I groaned as I wrestled with my guilt in the bath. Had I lost my marbles or what? What was up with all this constant guilt?

Just then, I heard a voice behind the door say, "Oneechan." It was my sister!

She must have wanted to accost me with a conversation. Had she waited until I'd stepped away from Satsuki-san in order to corner me in the bath? What a sneak attack! I had nowhere to run!

But then she said, "I'm sorry."

"…Huh?"

The sudden apology knocked me off-kilter, especially because her voice sounded so quiet. It reminded me of the time she'd accidentally eaten my Häagen-Dazs.

"So you know, Satsuki-senpai came to talk to me just a minute ago," my sister said.

"H-huh…? She did?"

After she'd gotten out of the bath, I figured. Okay, but what did they even have to talk about?

"She said it wasn't any of her business," my sister went on, "but she asked what we were fighting about."

"Y-yeah?"

Oh god, please tell me you didn't say it was my infidelity, I thought. Knowing my sister, she could very easily have said that! *What on earth did you tell her?*

As I went through this mental anguish, my sister continued. "So, I kinda told her what was up, and then she told me that you're really only dating for her sake. She apologized that she'd been so careless and caused this whole misunderstanding. And she says you're just too nice for your own good. You're not all that bad after all, really, Oneechan."

"Wait, hold on." Satsuki-san had said what now? "I mean, what she said is true, but…"

"Yeah, she said you actually like Mai-senpai," said my sister.

“Okay, that part’s not true!”

“I’m sorry for making the wrong assumption.”

“Nah, that’s okay, I mean…”

There was something kind of embarrassing about getting a real apology out of my sister.

“I mean, I’m the one who caused the misunderstanding to begin with,” I said.

“Yup, you sure did.”

“Hey!”

Now that she’d made her apology, she was acting like that was all over and done with! Back to business as usual!

“But Satsuki-san said something else too,” my sister went on.

“Which was?”

“That she knows how you feel because she fights with her mom all the time. It gets really uncomfortable having to live under the same roof with someone you’re arguing with. It might be hard to be open about your own feelings, but she said I should go ahead and try to make up with you.”

“…Satsuki-san really said that?”

I couldn’t believe she’d really go out of her way just because things were tense between me and my sister.

I heard a smile in my sister’s voice on the other side of the folding door.

“You know, Oneechan, you’ve been pretty incredible ever since you started high school,” she said. “You have a really good friend in Satsuki-senpai.”

Her words rang in my ears. I nodded ever so slightly.

“…Yeah,” I admitted. “I do.”

I finished up my bath, dried my hair, and before long, it was time for lights out. I’d thought Satsuki-san would want to stay up late practicing, but she said, “We’ll be more efficient if we wake up early and spend all day playing tomorrow.” No doubt about it, this girl was in perfect control of herself.

“At any rate,” she said, “if I don’t get enough sleep, my head doesn’t function properly.”

“Well, that’s fair,” I admitted.

“Mai’s the type who can go at full steam for three days straight with no rest. Once, she forced me to stay up with her that long. It was horrid.”

I laughed weakly. “Maybe she was trying to do you both in at once.”

I was in bed; Satsuki-san had our guest futon. She lay on her side in the blankets with her hair up in a scrunchie, making me think she wanted to go to sleep.

“Can I turn the light off?” I asked.

“Please do.”

I killed the lights with the remote, and we lay there in the exact opposite formation of that time I’d spent the night at Satsuki-san’s house.

“…I can still see the game screen whenever I close my eyes,” she admitted.

I chuckled. “Yeah, that happens to me all the time.”

“It’s hard to hit moving targets.”

“Next time we play, we’ll practice hitting moving targets while starting to move yourself, okay?”

“So long as I live, I’ll never be able to make that work,” she sighed.

“Yeah, I used to feel the same way.”

I heard a rustling of clothes in the dark, and then Satsuki-san said, “How did you get to be so good?”

“Huh? I mean… You know, I had that period where I skipped school and holed up in here, so I spent every day just…playing it like crazy.”

“You must have liked it, huh?”

“I don’t know if it was that, so much,” I admitted. “I mean, I did like it, but… It wasn’t like the simple, happy feeling you get from pure enjoyment. It was more like concentrated negative energy all poured

into an expression of aggression, you might say."

"Like stress relief?" she asked.

"More like a reminder that I could shoot and kill too, you know…"

"What are you talking about?" she said.

She laughed at my somewhat extremist remark.

"In any case," she continued, "that's what I meant."

"Huh? How so?"

That was another of her Satsuki-san-isms. Normally, she never answered me no matter what I asked, but now she actually decided to explain herself.

"You always look like you couldn't hurt a fly, but when push comes to shove, you fight back like anything."

"I thought I just failed to read the room again…"

"You did, and you've done so before as well. You sometimes blurt out the most unexpected things. But that's who you are, Amaori, and I find I don't mind that."

I had no idea how to respond, so I let a weak little chuckle out into the darkness around us. I guess that was…Satsuki-san's idea of a compliment, huh? It meant that she accepted at least one thing about me, and that was a huge relief in and of itself.

"Hey, Amaori," she said.

"O-oh yeah, sorry. I got kind of carried away for a second there."

"Carried away with what? You haven't even said anything…"

She sounded so done with me. That's what I got for being so quick to get carried away all the time. Urgh.

"…I just wanted to say thanks," she continued.

"Huh? Oh, don't mention it. I'm happy to teach you the game. Besides, I'm just paying you back for all the help with studying."

Which was rich of me to say, really, considering we were spending all of Saturday right before finals playing video games. Not to mention I'd be practicing all through finals week too… That'd probably be reflected in my scores, offsetting everything Satsuki-san taught me.

“No,” she said. “That’s not what I’m thanking you for.”

“What else did I do that’s worth a thank-you?” Seriously, what in the world could it have been? “Do you mean like…thanks for granting you the honor of meeting me?”

“Why do you have those random moments of super-high self-esteem?” she asked. “It gives me whiplash.”

I guess I was wrong then. Eh, whatever, I had no idea. I yawned. Last night was a disaster… I’d been so nervous, I hardly got to sleep.

“I wanted to thank you,” she said, “for giving me an opportunity to challenge Mai.”

Her voice was so calm that it slipped past the defenses of my heart and made me make a weird “bwuh?” sound. Fearing she’d get upset with me for not taking her seriously enough, I backpedaled and asked, “Aren’t you always challenging her with your test scores?”

“Yes, I can’t deny that we do our absolute best to compete in academics. But that’s different. We don’t usually have opportunities to both start from zero and compete in an unfamiliar game.”

“Yeah, I guess not,” I said.

“Right? I know I made the suggestion, but I never expected Mai to go along with it. But she’s definitely taking it seriously, isn’t she? No matter how long I have to prepare, I know I won’t be able to match her. It feels rather odd to be doing this again with her.” Then she shook her head. “No, that isn’t really the right way to put it. It isn’t an odd feeling at all. I know exactly what it is.”

I looked at Satsuki-san’s face in the faint, fleeting moonlight that drifted in through the curtains. This beautiful, dauntless teenage girl wore the most innocent smile. “It’s very fun,” she said.

Considering Mai and Satsuki-san’s relationship, I still couldn’t say I knew exactly how she felt, but…all the same, I kinda did. It seemed really, really nice to have a friend who matched your energy stride for stride.

“So that’s what I’m thanking you for, Amaori,” said Satsuki-san.

“…Nah,” I said. “Don’t mention it.”

The thing was, I kind of regretted my decision. I wished I had chosen a different game, not one I’d played to death, so I could have

been new to it too. It would have been loads more fun that way, for sure. But that wouldn't have helped me reach my goal. I'd put winning before everything else.

"Goodnight," Satsuki-san said. "See you tomorrow."

"Uh-huh… 'Night."

Man, I was jealous of Mai and Satsuki-san's relationship. The way they trusted each other deep down like that, you could really feel all the years they'd spent together.

…Having friends kinda rocked, huh? Yeah, at the end of the day, I did want to be friends with Satsuki-san. I wanted to spend the rest of my time in high school having a blast with her as a best friend.

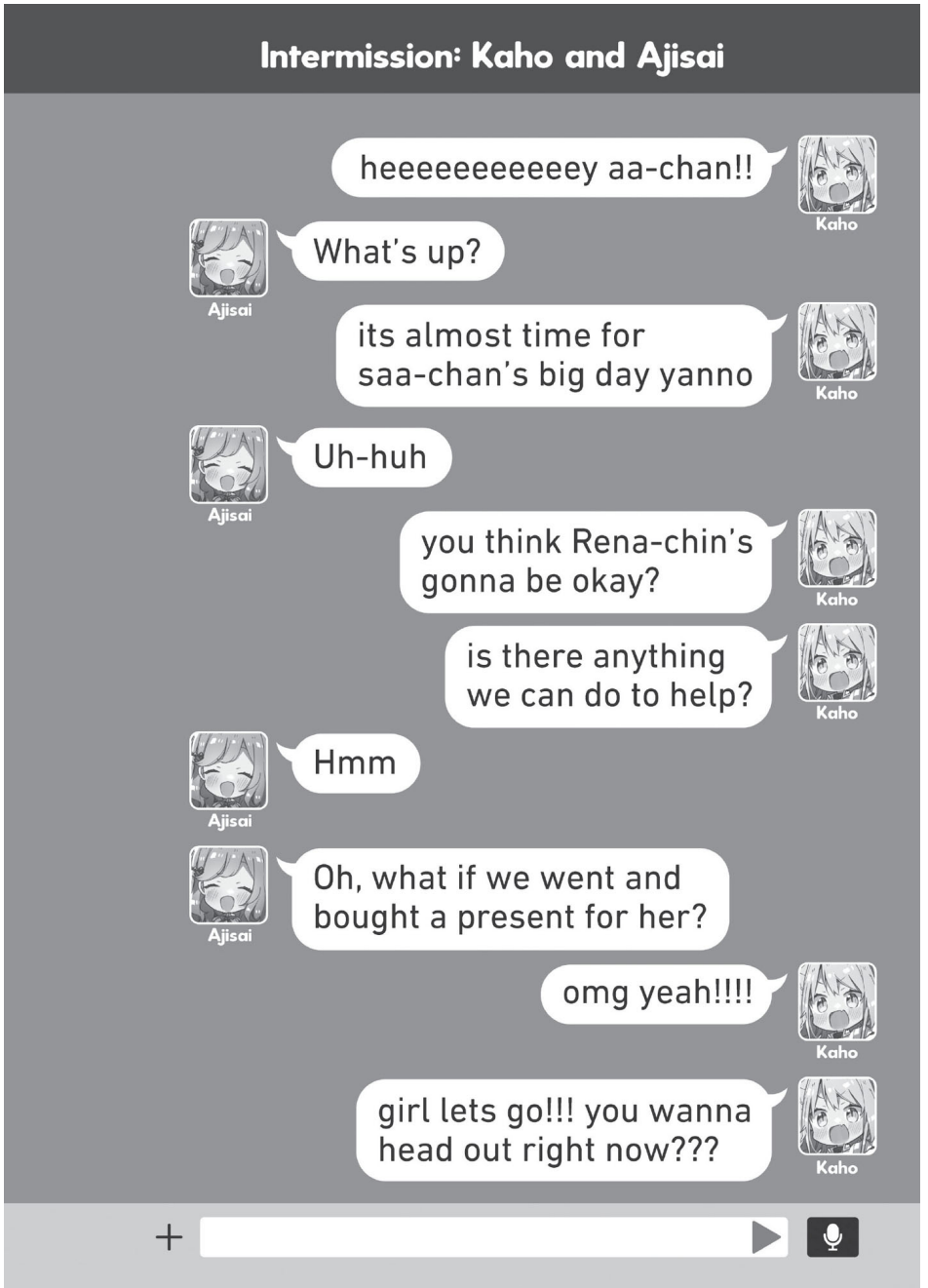
What if I lost on purpose to make that happen? That way, at least Satsuki-san would be with me for a little while, right? Considering how much better I was, I figured it wouldn't be so hard to just beat Mai and then lose on purpose to Satsuki-san. Then we could be together through all of high school. And maybe we could become friends along the way.

But, no. That wasn't right. I wanted Satsuki-san to be happy. You can't keep fighting with Mai, Satsuki-san, I thought. That had to be so sad, fighting your friend like that. I knew, because I felt the same way. Satsuki-san and Mai needed to patch things up.

And for that to happen, I had to win. No matter what it took, I had to win. I absolutely could not lose. Not to Mai. Not to Satsuki-san.

The next Friday, the day of our decisive battle arrived.

Intermission: Kaho and Ajisai



Intermission: Kaho and Ajisai

Ajisai

It's the middle of the night?!

okay so on saturday!!

Kaho

Ajisai

Okie-dokie

yay it's a date!!!!

Kaho

Ajisai

It's a date!

let the SS ajikaho set sail!!!

Kaho

Ajisai

What's Ajikaho?

lol you know!!

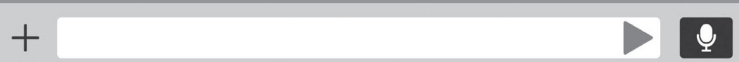
Kaho

its like uhhhhhhh...a sneeze?

Kaho

Ajisai

I have no idea what you're talking about.



Kaho: heeeeeeeeeeeeeey aa-chan!!
Ajisai: What's up?
Kaho: its almost time for saa-chan's big day yanno
Ajisai: Uh-huh
Kaho: you think Rena-chin's gonna be okay?
Kaho: is there anything we can do to help?
Ajisai: Hmm
Ajisai: Oh, what if we went and bought a present for her?
Kaho: mong yeah!!!!
Kaho: girl lets go!!! you wanna head out right now???
Ajisai: It's the middle of the night?!
Kaho: okay so on saturday!!
Ajisai: Okie-dokie
Kaho: yay it's a date!!!!
Ajisai: It's a date!
Kaho: let the SS ajikaho set sail!!!
Ajisai: What's an Ajikaho?
Kaho: lol you know!!
Kaho: its like uhhhhhhh...a sneeze?
Ajisai: I have no idea what you're talking about.

Chapter 4:
There's No Freaking Way I'll Beat Mai And Satsuki-san Unless…

"OKAY, EVERYONE, I'm giving back the tests now," my homeroom teacher, Hirosaki Michiru-sensei, called to us

in the exact same tone of voice you'd use to say, "Come to dinner, kids! It's curry tonight." It was the last homeroom of the day.

Michiru-sensei was just over thirty and was also our English teacher. She was tiny, about 150 cm, and since she was so bright and outgoing, we called her Micchan-sensei. According to rumor, when Mai had first started here and no one had wanted to trust that…that foreign interloper, Michiru-sensei was the only one to put her hand up and go, "Okay, I'll take her." Yet, for all of her bravery, Michiru-sensei was also a completely normal person.

"Now let's see yours, Amaori," she said.

"Yes?"

"I can tell you worked hard this time."

"Huh? Oh, uh, I did."

Ashigaya High was also a bit of a prep school, so we got our tests back with a little piece of paper rolled up like a straw with our class rank written on it. I went back to my seat, and when

I checked my grades…I found that they were a fair bit more decent than they normally were. I mean, they used to suck, so I'd gotten them up to around average, even though I'd spent the whole last week doing nothing but practicing that video game. It looked like Satsuki-san's demands to see the fruits of my labor had really gotten to me. It was kind of thrilling. I was happy enough just keeping it to myself and looking at it, so I inconspicuously slid it into my desk. All my friends always scored way higher than me, so I wasn't eager to show them my pitiful results.

But wow, had I really made this much growth in, what, only two weeks? Just two weeks of test prep after school was enough to make a sizable difference in my grade. If I kept up studying after school, could I

potentially steal Mai's spot as the top of the class?

Yeah, maybe if I worked myself half to death in the process… Talk about a pipe dream. (Unless…?)

"Hmm, now, let's see," Michiru-sensei said. "I had something else to say. Oh, right! Tomorrow's the assembly for the last day of term, so we don't have class. Don't show up, okay?"

I snuck a glance at the nearby desks. Who'd won this time—Mai or Satsuki? They always rushed to check first thing, but today, neither had moved a muscle. Mai hadn't even so much as looked at her test yet. I guess she was too preoccupied with what was going to come after this.

Once homeroom ended, Ajisai-san, who sat in front of me, turned around.

"I-is today the day, Rena-chan?" she asked.

"Yeah."

Today, we were planning on going to Mai's house right after school. I'd already shared the news with Ajisai-san and Kaho-chan well in advance, what with me being a ball of nerves right up until yesterday. But now all that was left was to get it over with. All I had to do was give it my best shot. I wasn't going to let all my hard work go to waste, yanno? I was invincible now.

I smiled with perfect confidence and proudly declared to Ajisai-san, "I-I-I-I'm r-r-r-ready to g-g-give it my all… Don't worry, I have this in the bag… So just you wait, and I'll… Hurk."

"Rena-chan?! You look like your soul's about to leave your body!"

How odd. I'd been trying to talk the way Mai always sounded. Wait a sec. I realized then that my hands were shaking. What was that all about? Was I, heaven forbid, nervous? Me, nervous? Impossible.

"Oh god, Ajisai-san…" I groaned.

I couldn't do this anymore. I just wanted to go home and sleep. God, what a weird sudden attack of weakness!

Then Kaho-chan came up and, with a few spirited whacks on the back, told me, "You're gonna be okay, Rena-chin!"

"Ow!"

"Even if you screw up big time, to the point where Mai-Mai and Saa-chan draw their swords every time they pass in the hall, don't

worry. 'Cause hey… You'll still have me and Aa-chan!"

She tipped me a hearty wink and a thumbs-up. Oh god, thanks…

"Kaho-chan, Ajisai-san…" I whimpered.

"We'd never force you into this, of course," Ajisai-san added. "If this doesn't go well, we'll talk it out later. We can think of our next move together, okay?"

What was this? It seemed too good to be true. Did she really mean that everything would be okay, even if I lost? Well, no—if I lost, I'd end up with one of the others for life, and that definitely didn't count as okay. But I still felt like a huge weight had been lifted from my shoulders thanks to the combined efforts of Kaho-chan and Ajisai-san.

"Just remember that we've got big plans tomorrow," Kaho-chan said, "so the best thing you can do right now is win!"

"Ughhhhh I'll do my best…"

"H-hey, Kaho-chan, don't put so much pressure on her," Ajisai-san said. "I-it's okay, Rena-chan, really. Don't cry. We'll make it work somehow, okay? Okay?"

Thanks to the two socially adept girls coaxing me back to life, I was finally able to walk into it with a positive outlook. Ugh, I couldn't believe I was such a bother to them, even at a time like this!

As my heart finished sniffling and sobbing, Mai and Satsuki-san walked up.

"Ready to go, Renako?" Mai asked.

"Yes, let's be on our way, Amaori," said Satsuki-san.

All five of us were back together again, just like old times, even if their relationship wasn't like old times. The whole vibe of the complete group, once more assembled with Mai at its center, was freaking ridiculous. It was like a team made up of only legendary Pokémon—apart from me, of course.

"Okay, then we're off!" I said.

Spurred on by Kaho-chan and Ajisai-san's encouragement, I followed after Mai and Satsuki-san. Yup, we were going to wrap this up, and then everyone could start off summer vacation on a high note!

This was my second time going over to Mai's house. None of the staff had been home the first time, but today Hanatori-san followed us all the way up to the penthouse.

Satsuki-san kept yawning in the elevator. When I took a closer look at her, I realized she had dark circles under her eyes.

"Did you stay up late last night?" I asked.

"Yes, a bit," she said. "Just to wrap up my final preparations, you see."

She'd once confessed that a lack of sleep muddled her head, so I wondered if she was going to be okay.

"I'm fine," she insisted. "I took a few catnaps in the limousine."

"You're reading my mind again," I told her.

"No, your face is just an open book."

On the flip side, Mai's face made for an elegant view in profile. Her skin could have been made out of marble for all I knew. She caught my eye, giggled, and raised an index finger.

"Let me guess what you're thinking," she said.

"What?"

"If Satsuki-san weren't here, we could be kissing and hugging by now, no?"

"You are completely off the mark!" I exclaimed.

"Oh? So you're thinking about that even with her here? I must admit, that's a tad embarrassing, even for me…"

"We've arrived," Hanatori-san said, and the door opened the second she finished speaking.

We stepped out into the hallway, and Mai led us to a place she called the game room, where everything was all set up for us.

"Wow, this is crazy," I said.

The room was enormous, with a PS4 off to one side and screens and gaming chairs arranged in a triangle just like an e-sports setup. Oh my god. Mai's habitual wealth-flaunting normally really put me off, but this? Not gonna lie, it actually got me pretty excited.

Mai proudly rested an elbow on a chair and asked, "What do you think, Renako? Do you like it?"

“U-uh…yeah, it’s not bad…”

“What was that?”

“I said, it’s fine…”

“One more time.”

“I really like it, okay…?”

Mai chuckled. “Of course you do. And I really like you, Renako.”

“Are you two done yet?” Satsuki-san asked as she whacked me upside the head. Ow.

“Right, right,” Mai said. “There’ll be time enough for flirting later, once Satsuki’s gone home. At any rate, I had the contractor set this up for us and had the chairs customized for our body types, but they may still need a little fine tuning.”

“I-I see…” I said.

Mai’s chair was red, Satsuki-san’s was black, and mine was pink. I guess she really had gotten this setup specially made.

“Let me assist you,” Hanatori-san said, coming to my aid.

“Oh, okay. Th-thank you.”

She showed me how to use the levers to adjust the height or recline the seat until it fit me just perfectly. I thought I’d feel a little weird, since I did the bulk of my gaming sitting on the floor, but I immediately felt right at home in the chair. Now that, I thought, was the power of an expensive chair.

“It seems very nice, certainly,” Satsuki-san acknowledged as she sat down in her own chair and picked up the controller.

The screen already had the game up and ready to go.

“Hey, Mai, if you don’t mind,” I mumbled like a picky girlfriend, “do you think we can play the PC version?”

“What’s the difference?” Satsuki-san asked.

“A great question, Satsuki-san.” I chuckled. “First, the frame rate is completely different. And since it’s for a mouse, the aiming’s totally incompatible between the two versions. By the way, this game was originally a Steam exclusive that got ported to PS4 later on. Along the way, it turned out that the PlayStation’s specs weren’t able to handle hundred-player matches, so they brought the max down to thirty. As a

trade-off, they added a private matchmaking system, but it's still every budding gamer's dream to play the version with the best performance." I chuckled once more.

"I didn't follow a word you just said, Amaori," Satsuki-san said.

I gasped and returned to myself. The light rekindled in my eyes. "Wh-what was I saying just now?!"

"Uh…"

"No, no, Satsuki-san, this isn't what it looks like!" I babbled. "That wasn't me just now. That was junior high me!"

"O-okay… I didn't know what you meant by that earlier, but now I definitely get it… My goodness, you really have turned over a new leaf."

"Stop looking at me with so much pity!" I begged.

Oh god, what a huge slipup… I lamented. I'd worked on changing my speech style, and I'd even started projecting from my stomach so that others would hear me better. Yet despite all my efforts, my daily sit-ups… Ugh.

"I'm not sure I get it either," Mai said, "but I like every version of you, Renako."

"Don't try to butter me up!"

The fact that Mai approved of the part of me that I so loathed made me want to scratch my throat out and die. Why must I take so much damage right before this final battle? Come on, every RPG these days gave you a save point and a full recovery right before the last boss.

"All right, if we're ready now, let's get started," Mai said.

She sat down last and elegantly crossed her long legs. Now the triangle was complete.

I grabbed my phone out of my bag, set it down on the table, and took a deep breath. I'd be okay. I'd be okay. *Just play it like normal. Just play it like normal*, I reminded myself.

"Yes, let's," said Satsuki-san. "No objections here."

"I'm ready to go too," I said.

"All right." Mai, sitting to my left, had her hair pulled back in a

ponytail so it wouldn't get in her eyes. Satsuki-san, sitting to my right, tied up her hair as well and fixed her gaze directly on the screen. If either of them was nervous, I sure as hell couldn't tell. Perhaps they were used to such trials, but I'd never gone through anything like this before. Still, I had my gamer self, after all this time. It was time to reinstall the version of me from back then, the version whose only opportunity to show her self-worth popped up in PvP matches.

"Okay," I said. "I'm going into private match. Smallest random map. Battle royale mode. Standard weapons. Three people max. Rules say that whoever gets first twice wins… All right…now."

The other two entered the password and joined the room. All that was left for me was to press the button to start.

If Mai won, I'd have to marry her. If Satsuki-san won, I'd have to marry her. And if I won, the two of them would make up and be friends again. God, what awful conditions! But I had no other choice but to go through with it.

I took a deep breath and pushed the button. "Go!"

Okay, first match, go. I soaked up the screen in front of me. We'd loaded into one of the residential maps, a bunch of pre-fab homes on a farm in the US.

In this game, you didn't get any weapons to start, so your first goal was to hunt around and pick up items. Your equipment was make-or-break in the first phase of the game. If you didn't find stuff, you'd be forced to fight with your fists.

Right, so in this layout, there was probably something up on the second floor. Okay, let me go pick that up, and then next…

Just then, I heard a sound. "…Hm?"

Oh yeah. I'd forgotten we weren't using headphones. If I turned up my volume, it'd just mix together with Mai's and Satsuki-san's, so there was no point. But this wasn't like this was a confused brawl of thirty people. It was just us three. So we weren't going to run into each other this quic—

Something crossed my line of sight. It was Mai.

"What?!" I cried.

"Take that!" Mai yelled.

Her character lifted a crowbar-looking thing she must have picked up on the way and started beating the hell out of me with it. H-Hey! I shot back at her as quickly as I could with the pistol I'd just picked up, but she was too close for me to aim. That was a bad decision on my part. I should have hightailed it on out of there or given up and whacked her back with melee.

But by the time I registered what was happening, my screen went red. There was an awful dull thud of Mai landing the finishing blow, and then the English words "YOU ARE DEAD" filled up the screen.

Wha…wha…wha…

"What the heck was that?!" I yelled.

I slammed my hands down on the table without thinking in a show of egregious manners.

Mai looked pleased as could be. "How was it?" she asked. "Did I surprise you?"

"You think?!"

"Good. That actually went better than I thought it would."

"Better?!" I cried. "How did you even do that?"

Mai was still playing, but I had the mad impulse to get up and go shake her chair. (I didn't actually do it, mind you.)

Mai grinned, wielding her controller with all the elegance of a person swirling a glass of wine. "Oh come now, it wasn't so hard. If it's a three-player game on the smallest map, there are only twenty-four player spawn points, you know."

"Huh?" I asked. "Are there really?"

I didn't usually play private matches, so I had no awareness of the spawn points or anything like that.

"There are several locations all bunched up together," she told me. "I decided to run as fast as I could to those as soon as the match began. Had my guess been off, I would have lost a lot of time, so I'm glad it worked."

She gave her hair an elegant flick, the corners of her mouth turning up in a grin. "But what I can say? I'm just lucky."

"You… Ohhh, you little…" I was so frustrated I was about to spit blood.

I hadn't even lost because Mai was overwhelmingly strong or anything. Had I kept my cool, I could have dealt with her. But I'd panicked, and that was why I felt so frustrated with myself.

"By the way," Mai said, "I'm not sure how well they'll work, but I've drawn up some tactics to face you."

"What do you mean by that?" I asked.

"You know, tactics. Taking your personality into account, I came up with twenty strategies to start with and then whittled them down to three in terms of which would be most feasible. I have two left, in other words."

Mai just couldn't be happier. Her wide grin would have made for a perfect score, if you were grading her on gaming with a friend.

She giggled. "You're quite a strong player yourself, but you must remember that there's no one in the world who spends more time thinking about you than I do."

"Grr…aggh…urrrggh…" I groaned. This freaking girl! Right from the start, she'd come at me to try and make me lose!

Why hadn't I realized this would happen? Mai was the very same girl who had trained nothing but the shortest, most effective combos back when we were playing that fighting game. So of course she'd come up with optimal strategies that would leverage her skills, even in an FPS!

Right. If we'd gone toe-to-toe in a shoot-out, I'd have beaten her with my superior talent. It only made sense for her to hunt me down and defeat me with her people-reading skills. God, how frustrating!

Slumped way down in my chair, I moved on to the next screen to watch the other two play. There was no point in staying salty forever. Now was the time to gather information for the next match.

I decided to watch Satsuki-san, who'd fallen silent a bit ago. She'd acquired a decent collection of items and reinforced her gear. Looking at the way she played now, it was like she was a completely different person than the girl who'd trained at my house. She seemed to have memorized the map, and she moved through areas open to enemy fire with the appropriate level of caution. Honestly, I was impressed. I felt like a proud teacher watching my pupil go out into the world for the first time.

“Satsuki-san, you’re gotten so much better,” I said. “You’re amazing!”

“Be quiet,” she said. “You’re distracting me.”

“Ah, right.”

Meanwhile, Mai was…a mess. She was doing some things right, but there were other things she was ignoring completely. Compared to Satsuki-san, who had the basics down pat, Mai moved erratically. She’d have gotten some kills in a normal game, but she would also have gotten just as many deaths. As a spectator, it made me want to intervene.

Then the two finally found one another on the battlefield and began to trade bullets. Mai stood at an advantage with stronger weapons and the high ground, but Satsuki-san could still completely turn the tide.

However, the match ended in Mai’s favor by a slim margin. I wouldn’t have been surprised if either had won. Even though Satsuki-san had that handicap, she’d put up a good fight.

“What a pity,” Mai said.

“…Right. What a pity.” Satsuki-san pulled out her phone and checked something in her notes app. In a very Satsuki-san-esque move, she’d filled it with prep notes.

“That’s one point for me,” Mai said. “Now it’s the match point, and up next will be my victory.”

She looked at me with the eyes of a child who’d just been told they could go pick out any toy they liked. A chill ran up my spine.

“What, you think you can rack up a bunch of straight wins?” I challenged.

“After I win, Renako,” Mai said, “should we go introduce me to your parents right away? I know I’m still a student, but think about it. If you’d like, we could live together for several days of the week. Hanatori’s an excellent cook, you know, and I do hope you like her.”

“Could you cut a girl a break and stop planning her life half the time?!” I snapped.

Was this a strategy to cause me mental damage? Because it was working!

“Okay, come on, let’s start already!” I said.

Round two. Except this time, I’d win. What I had to do was simple. Once I picked up a strong weapon, I’d head to a place with a good view of the map. If someone opened fire on me, then it’d come down to a competition of skill. And trust me, when it came down to shooting targets thirty meters away, experience is king.

Fortunately, the map this time was a desert area, meaning it was bigger and relatively easier to have longer, more drawn-out matches. That made it harder for Mai to launch an attack right out of the gate.

I took a quick glance at the others, just to see what kind of faces they were making, and got a nasty shock. Mai was deep in thought, making a thoughtful “hmm” with her hand on her chin and her controller in her lap.

“Y-you know we’re in the middle of a game, right?” I asked.

“Of course I know. I’m doing my best in order to win, which means that I also need this very necessary planning phase.”

“I-I don’t get it, but okay…”

This time, I managed to pick up the assault rifle, one of my go-to weapons. Once I grabbed it, I booked it out of there, on high alert for a surprise Mai attack and keeping a close eye on my surroundings.

One thing I made sure to avoid was guessing Mai’s tactics. No matter how much her people skills had me over a barrel, this wasn’t like real life. In the game, we only had a limited number of options. She could try devious tactics all she wanted, but if they weren’t part of the meta, it was because they had some major flaw in them. Therefore, I could handle whatever she threw at me—provided I didn’t let my guard down. In theory, at least.

“What’s the plan now, Mai?” I taunted.

“Give me a minute to think,” she said. “I’ll find a way to get your glass slipper to you, just you wait and see.”

“Prince Charming isn’t supposed to crack Cinderella’s skull open with a crowbar, you know!”

Just then, I noticed someone and immediately fired my gun. It was…not Mai. It was Satsuki-san.

She clicked her tongue. “Amaori, huh?

“Tongue-clicking even in the middle of a game? Freaky!”

I waited for the right moment as we traded shots. Satsuki-san found cover and, poking just her head over it, fired right back at me with great aim. Perfect! This was shaping up to be an incredible match.

Then she made a depressed little “Oh…” sound.

“Hmm?” I said.

It wasn’t so much that I’d just activated my miraculous aiming abilities. It was more that Mai’d just joined in the fray, and Satsuki-san was caught in the crossfire. In a game like this with only the three of us, getting fired on by two people made for a super sticky situation.

“What do you think, Satsuki?” Mai asked. “Should we take out Renako first?”

“What nonsense are you spouting?” Satsuki-san said. “If you win here, then the competition will be over.”

“Oh? What, are you not confident you can beat me one-on-one?”

“Oh, I’m plenty confident,” Satsuki-san insisted. “I’d just prefer something that gives me a slightly higher chance of winning.”

“I see. Worried about your chances, are we? But this is a lot different from those school subjects you’re so good at, you know.”

“…What?”

For the last several minutes, there’d been nothing but uninterrupted gunfire. I assumed Mai had started talking to her in order to break her concentration, and now Satsuki-san could no longer ignore her.

“Say you have two roads. You can pick the narrow road where you’ll have no escape in case of an ambush, or you can pick the broader path. But no matter which one you choose, there are still enemies lying in wait on either road.”

“What are you talking about?” Satsuki-san asked.

“Naturally, anyone would pick the latter road. In terms of chances of survival, that would be the objectively correct option, wouldn’t you say? It’s only obvious.”

Mai and Satsuki-san were moving steadily away from me. My best

chance was to drop in on them while they were fighting, so I chased after them. But I felt uneasy about this. In the first match, how come Satsuki-san hadn't won the shoot-out against Mai? I had a feeling I'd made some huge misunderstanding. Were Satsuki-san and Mai's skills really so closely matched?

"But Satsuki," Mai went on, "the true correct answer is the path that doesn't have any enemy."

Satsuki-san gulped in shock. Mai'd just killed her. No way. Had Mai really beaten her again?

"I have to give it to you," Mai said. "You always do make the correct choices. And that's precisely why you'll never beat me."

And then, as Mai stood there pleased with herself and gloating, I shot a bullet right through her. Mai froze awkwardly. I looked just as awkwardly right back at her.

"Um…" I said. "I mean, you were just standing there. I couldn't help it."

"Right," she said. "Well, I get that. That happens."

I won! Now it was my match point too. Satsuki-san was the only one who was still…you know.

She rose to her feet with a hurried clatter, her long hair swaying. She asked, "…May I use the restroom?"

"Help yourself," Mai said, gesturing with the palm of her hand.

Satsuki-san walked out.

"…Satsuki-san," I muttered, worried for her.

Mai shrugged. "I guess I went a little too far."

"…Yeah, Mai. You really did."

That wasn't what you did to a friend. I really wanted to say that, but I kept silent. It felt wrong to impose my own standards on Mai and Satsuki-san's relationship.

"But I thought that if I said that," Mai went on, "I'd beat her easily. If I didn't pull out all the stops, if I simply let her take the victory, do you really think she'd be happy?"

"No, but I mean…"

I got what she was saying, sure. If Satsuki-san found out that

someone was handicapping themselves around her, I knew she'd be furious. Doubly so if that person was Mai.

"She'd be happier if she didn't try so hard all the time," Mai said.

"…But you know she can't, Mai. She's Satsuki-san, isn't she?"

"Well, you're not wrong."

Just then, Hanatori-san came in with a tea tray. That was godly timing on her part, as we'd only just now gone on break.

"Th-thank you," I said as I took a cup from her. I lifted it to my nose and sniffed. It smelled good. The warm steam teased my lips and made me relax. When I took a sip, I could taste just a slight hint of something sour and bitter in the sweetness. It tasted delicious, invigorating.

As I idly turned the last match over in my mind, I said, "Hey, Mai."

"Hm?"

"You know, I have to hand it to you. You really are pretty incredible. I don't think anyone else thinks like you do."

"But of course," Mai said. "For I'm Oduka Mai, the one fit to be your companion for life."

"Nope, not happening." It wasn't happening, but… Look, like it or not, you could just feel how cool Mai was. She'd been totally running circles around Satsuki-san, even though Satsuki-san had practiced so hard.

Mai brought her cup to her lips. "You know," she said, "she was the one who taught me what it means to have freedom."

"What do you mean?" I asked.

Mai's blue eyes stared off into the distance.

"It's an old story," she said. "We'd only just met each other then."

"So you were in elementary school?"

"Mm-hmm." Mai shrugged. "Goodness… I don't understand how she got so hung up on me."

"Yeah, I don't get it either, but I mean…"

Satsuki-san hated to lose, but it wasn't just anyone who could spark her competitiveness. It was all about Mai, Mai, Mai to the very

end. At first, I'd thought it was about frustration from losing all this time, or maybe just something that came from growing up together, but…

I glared at Mai in disgust for not having a shred of self-awareness. "I mean, I don't get why you're so hung up on me either," I pointed out.

"But you were destined to be with me," she insisted.

"Oh god, not this again…"

"Yes, this again," she said. "I'll still feel the same way for you even in a hundred years, and I'll keep on saying so."

Ugh. There she went, breaking out the lovey-doveyness just because we were on break.

I drained my cup and took a deep breath. Okay, time to think about round three, I reminded myself. If at all possible, I wanted me and Mai to get this over with now. But I'd be fine. I was calm. I knew I could win the next match.

And then it hit me.

"Hey," I said, "don't you think Satsuki-san's taking a while?"

"You're right," Mai said, looking at the empty black chair. "But let's give her some alone time for now, shall we?"

My eyes widened unintentionally at how casually Mai had said that. "Alone time?" I repeated.

Mai didn't say anything. She looked scared, like she was afraid of insulting Satsuki-san by putting it into words.

"Y-you really think?" I asked.

I stood up without thinking, my body moving on its own.

"I-I'm going to check on her really quick," I said.

"I'm sure she'd be better left alo—"

"No."

The word was already out of my mouth before I'd realized what I'd said. Mai looked startled by my refusal.

"I-I mean," I backpedaled quickly. "Mai, remember when you came after me? That time I ran up to the roof?"

"Yes, and as a result, I made you fall off that roof."

“W-well, yes. But.”

I searched for the words but couldn’t find the right ones. What I finally settled on was the truth, without any ornamentation.

I bit my lip and told her, “But in doing so, you made me happy.”

Mai chuckled ever so softly. “Did I really? Well, in that case, I respect your decision.”

From where I saw her in profile, Mai looked curiously sad. “After all,” she added, “I’m sure anything I said wouldn’t get through to her.”

I sped off for the bathroom. It felt as if Mai had just entrusted me with several somethings, but I couldn’t handle so many things. So I just took the one.

The bathroom door was shut up tight, like an immovable stone door before a labyrinth. I felt like she was going to shoot me down for anything I said, so I gingerly spoke up and went, “Hey, uh… Satsuki-san?”

There was no response.

“Satsuki-san,” I said again.

I waited a moment, and then I heard a voice. “Amaori.” The way her voice sounded so horribly unmotivated, lacking all drive, made me squeeze the hand I held to my chest.

“I’m sorry for worrying you,” she said. “I’ll be back in just a minute. I was only taking a moment to think about how the next match might go.”

I put my palm up against the door and gave it a light push. It felt cold and inflexible to the touch, as was only to be expected.

“I’m not optimistic about it,” she said. “Mai’s a formidable opponent, you know. It’s just…I’ve been working so hard. If I only had a little more time, then maybe…”

“…Yeah,” I said. “I can tell you’ve been working really, really hard. And you’ve definitely gotten loads better.”

There was a small beat before she said, “…But I still can’t beat Mai.”

“Well, I mean…”

There wasn't anything to say. You just ran into people like that sometimes. No matter what game you put in front of them, they rocked it, as I'd seen any number of times myself. You'd get a person who could run laps around you even though you'd played way, way more matches than them, and you'd come out of it afterwards thinking they were some kind of natural genius.

Mai had been working as a model since she and Satsuki-san were kids. To all of the other girls her age chasing that same dream, it must seem like Mai just kept on beating and beating them. She never needed to practice fighting a CPU first. She was always the winner, no matter what.

So why even bother? The words crawled up my throat, but I swallowed them down. They would have been no comfort to Satsuki-san.

"You know," she said, "I had work all through finals week too."

"…Huh?" I said.

"My manager said I could take time off, but I'd promised my mother I'd bring home money for the family once I was in high school. I didn't want to go back on my word to her."

"Right. I get that."

"Then I was studying for our finals and practicing for this on top of that."

So that's why she had all those dark circles under her eyes… She'd been working her butt off with all kinds of crap and cutting into her sleep to do so.

"Uh-huh…" I said. "I hear you. That's incredible, you know that? Satsuki-san, you're really inspirational."

Forget having a job, I couldn't even be bothered to study enough. From where I stood, the sky was the limit for Satsuki-san, and she had gone far out of my reach, soaring through the air high, high overhead. She was a beautiful shining moon that I could never catch up to.

"But all the same," she said, "all I've been doing is making myself an escape route."

"No…" *No, Satsuki-san. Don't say things like that.*

"If I put everything I have into competing with Mai and then lose

it all, I'll have lost the last person I could turn to."

"Satsuki-san…"

I remembered Satsuki-san smiling, talking about how fun it was to compete with Mai, and I felt a pang of regret. God, I'd been such a fool. I'd really thought that I'd be able to force them to make up if I just beat both of them, but that couldn't have been further from the truth. At this rate, even if we went back to playing and I won, Satsuki-san could never see herself as Mai's equal again. Their friendship would be over.

"…Satsuki-san…" I said again. I hung my head, despairing at the thickness of the wall between us.

I'd been so happy when Mai had chased after me, but that was because she was Mai. I wasn't good with my words like Mai was, and so I couldn't give Satsuki-san the comfort she deserved. Maybe, I thought, I'd have been better off leaving her alone after all. At least that way, Satsuki-san wouldn't have said all these things that hurt me too. I really, really regretted every single thing I'd done so far.

But…

…all the same, I said, "Don't give up now, Satsuki-san."

"…What are you talking about?" she asked.

It was too late to give up, I thought, on anything and everything. The competition had already started, and I was already waiting outside Satsuki-san's door. I couldn't change the fact that I was a recluse loser in junior high. I still had regrets, whole heaps of them, and the nightly cringefest was open to me every day of the year. But even then, even with all of that baggage, I'd managed to turn over a new leaf for high school. And I'd met Satsuki-san.

I lifted my head.

The only thing I could change, no matter what, was the future.

"Even if you don't win today," I said, recklessly, "there's always tomorrow. Maybe you'll win then. Maybe you'll win next time. Maybe you'll catch up to her."

"I…used to think that for the longest time," Satsuki-san said. "But just look at who I'm up against."

"Yes, you're up against Mai. But so what? Don't give up now! Satsuki-san, I don't want you to give up."

I wasn't being egotistical or anything. It was just my wish for her. I wished Satsuki-san could have a more positive attitude.

"You want to beat Mai, don't you?" I asked. "You've wanted to get a leg up over her this whole time, right? So, you can't give up. And Satsuki-san, I want to see you beat Mai too! I swear, I want to see the look on her face when you make her lose!"

"…It's too late to say that," she said.

"Too late, my ass! And come on, Satsuki-san, you were the one who got me involved in all this to begin with. I went along with you, betrayed my friend, and helped you because of you, Satsuki-san! It sucked like crazy the whole time, but I still did it because of you!"

Uh-huh. Because right from the start, we hadn't been strangers to each other. We were partners in crime, which is just another way of saying friends.

"So you can't give up on yourself!" I continued. "If you lose today, then you need to put on a brave smile and say we'll get them next time. Come on, Satsuki-san, be as bold as you always are. All she's got is her looks, so don't you dare let that pompous, puffed-up jerk get you down!"

I slammed my fist on the door.

"…Hey, partner," she said.

I didn't have any words of comfort or words of sympathy for her. Heck, we all knew I wasn't fit to say anything like that to Satsuki-san to begin with. It'd be pretty rich of me to say, "Come on, just work harder!" to someone who always worked a heck of a lot harder than me. All I could do was make a wish and hope she followed through. All that I could do, lowly average Joe that I was, was cheer her on with every fiber of my being.

All the moon does is shine in the reflected light of the sun, but since time immemorial, people have looked up at it and sent their heart out to it. Listen, no one questions whether the sun or moon is better.

But all the same, I really liked her. I liked that driven, optimistic part of Satsuki-san.

"Hey, Satsuki-san," I called.

I went to knock on the door again, but it must not have been locked, because it swung wide open on me. Huh?!

Satsuki-san was huddled on the toilet seat, her eyes wide as I barged in. She caught me before I went any farther.

“Ack!” I cried.

“What in the world are you even doing…?” she asked.

I thanked my lucky stars I hadn’t caught her with her skirt down.

“S-sorry,” I said. “I think I got kind of carried away there…”

“You knocked down the door,” she said.

“I mean, yes, I did! But don’t you think that’s kinda justified, given the circumstances?”

I couldn’t move, held against her chest as I was. Why wasn’t she pushing me away? Her body felt soft and supple with a core of steel, her black hair wrapping around me like a gentle blanket. She reminded me of the night of a full moon.

“H-how come you’re not letting me go…?” I asked.

“All your yelling has reminded me of something,” she said.

“That doesn’t answer the question! And, uh, what is it…?”

“You know,” she said, “that Mai isn’t as big of a hotshot as she thinks she is.”

“Satsuki-san…”

I lifted my head, and there was Satsuki-san’s face, so close to my own. Her lips traced the curve of a crescent moon in a slightly concerning grin.

“You have a lot of nerve to say whatever crosses your mind, you know,” she told me.

“Huh?!” I said. “I-I’m sorry.”

“No, it’s fine. I don’t mind that part of you.”

She grinned, an actually cheery smile. Then, still smiling, she moved even closer and—hello? She kissed me on the lips.

“What was that for?!” I cried.

“It wasn’t for anything in particular, really,” she said. “Just a little pick-me-up.”

“Last I checked, people’s lips aren’t exactly stimulants!”

“Why are you being so clingy?” she asked. “Come on, let

go already.”

“Of all the unfair things! Fine, you let go of me. L-let go already, dammit!”

Struggle as I might, I couldn’t break out of her arms in that tiny bathroom. Then she had the nerve to laugh at me. Grr!

Finally, I worked myself free and gasped for breath. She’d made me work up a sweat.

“What was all that about?” I muttered.

I flopped out of the bathroom and kneeled on the floor, trying to curb my wild breathing.

“Thank you, Amaori,” Satsuki-san said.

“Nah, don’t mention it,” I said. “What ‘it’ is, I have no idea, but whatever.”

“Now that I think about it,” she went on, “it’s rather silly that I’m the only one who almost succumbed to despair. I’ll just have to return the favor to Mai tenfold.”

“What on earth are you going to do to her?”

With a toss of her hair, it flying in the wind like an assassin’s black coat, Satsuki-san said, “Well, isn’t it obvious? I’m going to keep fighting.”

Perhaps, I realized, I’d awakened a monster.

Upon our return, Oduka Mai greeted us elegantly, with the same grace as when I’d left her. “Welcome back,” she said. “You’re rather late. How’d it go? Did you come up with any new strategies to defeat me?”

Satsuki-san didn’t try to hide it. She just declared straight out, “Yes, thanks to all the help I had.”

Bwuh?

“Oh my,” Mai said. “I’m looking forward to it.”

I couldn't tell if Satsuki-san meant it seriously or sarcastically. It was no fair that she could read my mind when I could never figure out the first thing about her.

"Anyway," Mai said, "what were you doing in the bathroom? Whatever it was made Renako sweat, from the looks of it."

Well, yes. Because Satsuki-san, for some unknown reason, had messed with me by grabbing me and not letting me go.

But before I could say anything, Satsuki-san volunteered. "That only stands to reason," she told Mai, "since, well…we were pressed up against each other awfully closely for a while there."

"Oh? Were you now?"

"Yes," she said. "Weren't we, Amaori?"

Satsuki-san's flirtatious glance bored into me. Nope, nope, nope, nope, nope! *Satsuki-san, you gotta work on your wording!* I thought. Was this her strategy? To unsettle Mai? Well, no matter what it was, it was clearly a dig.

"O-oh? W-were you now?" Mai repeated.

And boy, was that dig working! Mai picked up her teacup in an attempt to calm down, but the cup kept rattling in her hand. Oh baby, it was working all right!

"What a horrid way to word that, Satsuki," Mai went on. "I'm sure you only hugged her or some such, didn't you? Granted, even then, I wish I was in your shoes…"

"Oh, but we kissed too," Satsuki-san helpfully supplied. "Didn't we, Amaori?"

"We did, but that's not the whole story!"

Ah, so this was the point of all that canoodling. This girl was freaky!

"Renako…?" Mai said. She turned to me with a terrible look. Not even two weeks after her first kiss, and Mai's old childhood pal had already turned into a wicked girl who'd use kisses to get her way. But come on—that wasn't my fault, right?

Unable to stand it any longer, I pushed the button to begin the game. I was really starting to feel like we'd better get this over with ASAP.

“W-we’re starting now!” I announced.

The map this time was an urban area, your basic major FPS map. The stage was cut in two, with a business district on one end and an industrial area on the other.

“Say, Amaori,” Satsuki-san said. “Would you like me to tell you how I came to treat Mai as my rival?”

“Huh? Um, we literally just started the match?”

“Long ago, Mai was the picture of a perfect little rich girl.”

Oh great, I guess it was story time now.

“Hold on, Satsuki,” Mai said. “What are you about to tell Renako?”

“The first—no, excuse me, the only time in your life you’ve ever been cute.”

Satsuki-san kept right on talking as she played.

Focus on the game, me! I reminded myself. This had to be one of Satsuki-san’s traps, so I had zero reason to listen to her. Nope, no way, José.

“Naturally, she was as popular back then as she is now,” Satsuki-san said. “During school, she always had kids crowding around her. But after school was another story. She could never come play with us, because she had her lessons and modeling shoots every day. Even to my childhood ears, I thought it sounded tough.”

“…*Maman* gave me a gifted education,” Mai said. “Her principle was that raising a child meant you needed to bring out the child’s potential to its greatest extent.”

“But surely you must have found that stifling.”

“I suppose I did feel jealous of you and my other classmates, yes. You always seemed to be having so much fun.”

“Hence why you did such a ridiculous thing.”

“We all make bad decisions when we’re young,” Mai said.

Grr, I wish I had my headphones! I thought. I could hear them blathering on, whether I wanted to listen or not, and they were destroying my ability to focus.

“Then one day,” Satsuki-san went on, “Mai said she could join us,

and we all went out to play together. Our friend group was delighted, you see, because now we had the rare chance to play with Mai after school. However, Mai seemed distracted the whole time."

"…Are you really going to tell her all of this?" Mai asked.

"Huh, why shouldn't I?" said Satsuki-san. "Do you not want Amaori to hear?"

"…If I asked you to stop, you'd only keep right on going, wouldn't you?"

"You know me so well." Satsuki-san smiled breezily.

Mai shrugged. "That's what happens when you've known someone for years."

Man, you could really feel the history when you watched them banter. Wait, but now wasn't the time to be watching them!

"I suppose so," Satsuki-san said. "Anyway, as it got later, one by one all the other girls went home until only me and Mai were left. She crouched down in that park near the shrine, and she looked like she was about to cry. 'I can't go home today,' she said."

A shrine? Wait, that shrine? The very same shrine where Satsuki-san and I had stopped at on the day we'd agreed to go out?

Oh, balls, I thought. I couldn't help it anymore, so I finally added myself to the conversation. "B-but why she'd say that?" I asked.

Meanwhile, I snagged my favorite rifle and breathed an inward sigh of relief.

"You see, Mai had ditched her other after-school plans to play with us," Satsuki-san said. "I don't mean lessons either. It was a junior modeling job. She'd turned her phone off and gone to play with us instead. I think she must have been at the end of her patience. She just couldn't do it anymore."

Oh.

"I was only a child," Mai said. "I'd made errors at my job, I'd had all the adults upset at me, and I'd gotten into a little spat with *Maman*. It all built up, and I finally rebelled."

"And then what did you do, Satsuki-san?" I asked.

"I brought Mai home with me. I mean, I couldn't just leave her there. Still, I must admit I was mortified to show Mai my little

apartment—her with all her fancy clothes and glamorous rich-girl attitude. You know what my mother is like, and my father hasn't been in the picture for as long as I can remember."

Oh. So that was Satsuki-san's living situation.

"It was my first time going to a friend's house," Mai said. "I was just as nervous as you were, but your mother was so kind to me the whole time. You were too, of course."

"I was trying my best to be hospitable," Satsuki-san explained. "Whenever you looked upset, I felt like I needed to do everything I could to cheer you up. I was always fighting with my mother and running away from home, so I understood how you felt."

I almost thought I could hear gentle music playing from somewhere, but I was just imagining things. This was a battlefield. Bullets whizzed back and forth through the thick, pungent curtain of smoke. Yet, despite all that, I felt like we were a couple of friendly pals playing a nice, casual game together.

"A-and then what happened?" I prompted.

"Ah, right," said Satsuki-san. "It was that evening, after we'd finished having dinner, when…Mai's mother came."

"Yikes," I inadvertently moaned. "Let me guess. She barged in shouting her head off?"

"No, she acted more like an emotionless android," Satsuki-san said. "She apologized to us for all the trouble Mai had caused. But I thought that adults were supposed to get angry, so that made me scared. That was the first time I'd ever felt scared of an adult."

"It was the first time I'd seen *Maman* that way too," Mai said. "When I look back on it now, I assume she felt bad for pushing me too hard. My mother isn't the best at expressing her emotions, so she must not have had a good outlet for her guilt. But yes, she was frightening."

"Especially since you made a lot of people angry when you didn't show up for work, right?" Satsuki-san said. "I thought that your mom was going to take you away and kill you. I'm not kidding."

Satsuki-san grinned, and Mai joined in with a rueful smile of her own. Her ears were red, as they'd been for some time now. I wondered if this was what she was talking about earlier, about being a fool back when she was a kid.

“You’re exaggerating,” Mai said. “But I must admit I thought she was about to make me change schools, even if it was only elementary school.”

“So, what happened then?” I asked.

Mai was the one who answered. “Well, Satsuki stood up for me.”

“Huh?” I said. “Satsuki-san, you did?”

“I did,” Satsuki-san confirmed.

The little black-haired girl cried, “Please don’t take her away!” She stood in front of the blonde girl cowering behind her back and looked up at the woman in the suit.

Then, in an attempt to intimidate the woman, she shouted, “All Mai wanted to do was play with us. She didn’t do anything wrong! Besides, my mother always tells me that it’s our job as kids to play. So please don’t do anything bad to Mai!”

She spread her arms out, while the blonde girl sobbed behind her. Neither girl fully understood why she was crying. It was fear of her mother, and yet it was also the affection for this protector, the desire to stay—everything building up and up until the dam burst and a torrent of emotions came flooding out.

“Mai doesn’t need to go anywhere,” the little girl insisted. “She can stay with us if she wants, even. Because I promise that I’ll be with her, forever and ever!”

“Ah.” Mai stared at me with feverish eyes. “I see,” she said. “That’s why I…”

“Hm?” I asked.

“Oh, no. Nothing. Yes, nothing at all, Renako. I love you with all my heart, so no more of that.”

“Wh-whoa, that last part came out of left field…”

Satsuki-san let out a huge, theatrical sigh. “I stood up for her, yes, but my mom, who had no idea of the situation prior to that, got upset with us. Naturally, Mai had to go home, and it was all a giant mess.”

“And you’ve never been the same since,” Mai said.

“How so?”

“Ever since then, whenever I feel alone, you always follow me around and insult me. That was when you started reminding me that I’m not a big hotshot.”

“Because you aren’t,” Satsuki-san said. “It’s ridiculous that you try to act like an adult when you’re just a sniveling little girl.”

“But you’re the one who keeps competing with me,” Mai said. “And you never stop trying to act like an adult either. What’s all that about?”

“Because you acted like an adult first,” Satsuki-san said. “And I’m deigning to keep you company.”

“But why?”

“Because.” Satsuki-san set her controller down on the table. It almost looked like she was forfeiting the match.

She rose, crossed to Mai, and pointed at her with a glare, one that seemed to accuse her, *How dare you not know?*

“Because if I don’t,” Satsuki-san said, “then how am I supposed to be there for you the next time you feel alone?”

Mai and I both looked up at Satsuki-san. This meant that she acted the way she did so that she could always walk alongside Mai—so that Mai would never ever have to be alone.

Mai looked down in embarrassment and huffed. “You should have said that from the start,” she insisted. “I was sure you were just doing it to be disagreeable and to distance yourself from me. …But all the same, Satsuki, you’re still the girl you were when we first met. You are, and always have been, a very kind person.”

Before I could think it through, I muttered, “Satsuki-san, you really care for Mai, don’t you?”

Satsuki-san sat back down and sighed deeply. “Not really,” she said, “but feel free to think whatever you want. Believe me, I didn’t do what I did in order to win any favors from Mai. …And besides, it’s rather embarrassing to spell it out like this.”

Mai giggled. “Well, now I understand how you really feel, Satsuki. Thank you for telling me.” She looked down with a delighted grin, her hand on her chin.

“And, I suppose…” The controller was back in Satsuki-san’s hand, but I didn’t know when she’d picked it up. “After such a tender story, anyone would let their guard down. Even you, Mai.”

“…I beg your pardon?” Mai asked.

And then, as a gunshot rang out, Satsuki-san used all those aiming skills she’d picked up from practice and took Mai out with a bullet from mid-range.

Mai and I both went “Huh?” in perfect harmony.

Satsuki-san leaped to her feet again and planted a foot on her chair like some kind of delinquent. “Dumbass!” she crowed. “Let your guard down, didn’tcha? Didn’tcha?”

“Wha-wha-wha…” Mai spluttered, utterly speechless. “I thought you loved me…?”

“Yeah, but big whoop! I said I’d be with you forever, didn’t I? And look, here I am! But when I keep on losing and losing and LOSING to you, it’s no wonder I’ve gotten pissed! But no, in your head, everything’s all sunshine and daisies, huh?! And I’m nothing but a little goody-two-shoes to you, huh?”

I had to admit, this was a refreshing new take on Satsuki-san.

“…Did you seriously only tell that story to one-up me?” Mai asked. “You hid away all of your feelings for years on end, just to pull off a single gunshot?”

“Oh, but it was a small price to pay to get to see the look on your face right now!”

“You’re ridiculous!”

Mai started to tear up.

“Come on, Mai!” Satsuki-san cackled. “How does it feel to get dunked on, huh? Are you upset? Are you pissed at yourself? Ooh, does it hurt? C’mon, c’mon, tell ol’ Satsuki! Tell me everything! Because right now, I’m having the time of my life, Mai! I’m on cloud nine. Thank goodness I brought you home way back then—it all led to this!”

She was so animated, I almost broke out into applause.

“Why are you so mean to me?” Mai whimpered.

Oh, snap, I thought. Was this what Satsuki meant by paying Mai back tenfold?

Still, the facts were undeniable. Satsuki-san really did care for Mai, and I bet she really was grateful she'd taken Mai home. I couldn't suppress a chuckle as I watched this devolve into them snarling at each other. Man, I really wanted what they had. It'd be great, I thought, if I could tussle with them and really go all out. Well…okay, scratch that last bit. I'd cry if Satsuki-san came after me like that. Give me something more laid-back, please, I begged her.

And with that being said…

"All right, Satsuki-san," I said. "It's just you and me now, huh?"

Satsuki-san quietly returned to her seat and picked up the controller again.

"Amaori," she said.

"What's up?"

"Uh. I like you. I love you. I love you so very much it drives me crazy. Wow. Oh, this incredible Amaori love."

"You're terrible at this!" I yelled. "Fine, what do you like about me? Seriously, clue me in here!"

"…Let me see." She thought for a moment and then looked at me. Almost like she was looking down on me, she recited, "You're a nitwit, and you have no social skills whatsoever. And then, on top of being rash, you lack any talent of any kind…"

"Yeah?"

"And yet, because you know your own flaws, you're kinder than anyone else… You're always so devoted to going the extra mile that it kind of makes me ashamed… Or, uh, something like that."

Her voice sounded all soft and gentle. You know, I could almost think she really meant it—ha! Psych! I wasn't falling for that!

"Sweet, thanks!" I said. And then from up on a roof two hundred meters away, I blew her brains out with a thank-you headshot.

Count that one as a huge win for Amaori Renako!

Intermission: Kaho and Renako

Intermission: Kaho and Renako

omg Rena-chin you're the best!!!

Kaho

winner of the Ashigaya Nobel Prize!!!!

Kaho

how'd you do it??

Kaho

Renako

lol I just kinda went for it, you know? and it all sort of worked out idk

whoo!!

Kaho

Renako

yeah lol

but like you know you can tell me if it didn't go well, right

Kaho

I won't be mad

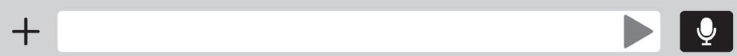
Kaho

and we can always try again together

Kaho

Renako

no, they legit made up, I swear!



Renako: hey, Kaho-chan

Kaho: heyisforhorses!!!!

Renako: uh okay

Renako: hey you know uh

Renako: so you know that whole thing about Oduka-san and Satsuki-san?

Kaho: omg don't worry about it!!! we'll get it next time!!! I'll help you brainstorm our next moves!!

Renako: uh no?? they made up, and they're friends again!

Kaho: girl what?!

Kaho: are you fr???

Renako: yeah, so don't worry. we're all on for tomorrow

Kaho: omg Rena-chin you're the best!!!

Kaho: winner of the Ashigaya Nobel Prize!!!!

Kaho: how'd you do it??

Renako: lol I just kinda went for it, you know?and it all sort of worked out idk

Kaho: whoo!!

Renako: yeah lol

Kaho: but like you know you can tell me if it didn't go well, right

Kaho: I won't be mad

Kaho: and we can always try again together

Renako: no, they legit made up, I swear!

Epilogue

"GREAT WORK, GUYS!" Kaho-chan yelled, holding up a glass for a toast. We were in a café near school, on our

way home after the end-of-term assembly. By "we," I meant all five of us—Kaho-chan, Ajisai-san, Mai, Satsuki-san, and me. That's right, the whole gang was back together, baby! Woo-hoo!

Sipping her cream soda, Kaho-chan shivered in delight. "From now on," she cheered, "it's summer vacation!"

"Do you have any plans, Satsuki-chan?" Ajisai-san asked.

"I do," Satsuki-san said. "I have a book I'd like to read so badly I'm planning on taking it into the bath. I'll sit in the tub and spend the whole day devouring it."

"Doesn't reading it in the bath damage it?" Ajisai-san asked.

"Humidity can do that, but I leave a window open and use a book stand, so I never have any trouble."

I finally found an opportunity to squeeze into the conversation from my spot on the verge of the group. With a winning grin, I said, "Y-yeah, that's right. Satsuki-san's bathroom is really cool."

Mai gave a knowing nod. "Yes, I must admit that the Koto bathroom shows exemplary taste, thanks to Satsuki's fastidiousness. However, Renako, how do you know about it?"

"Huh?"

Mai tilted her head with a smile. But I was pretty sure that wasn't a smile hiding behind those beaming eyes…

"R-Rena-chan?" Ajisai-san asked, once again gaping at me in shock.

Oh god… The color drained from my face with a whoosh. Had I gone and done it again? (In the bad sense of the phrase.)

Kaho-chan jeered at me, looking like she was having the time of her life, "Hey, what's that supposed to mean, huh? Huh?! Saa-chan, what's that supposed to mean?"

“There’s no need to make such a big fuss over it,” Satsuki-san said. “All it means is that Amaori’s been over to my house before.”

“Oh?” Mai asked.

Her eyes hounded Satsuki-san for answers, but Satsuki-san brushed it off, running a hand through her hair and answering oh-so casually. “There’s really nothing so odd about it, is there? I mean, it’s only inviting over a friend.”

My head felt like it was spinning. My contract with Satsuki-san was over, meaning all those breathless, heart-pounding, uncomfortable days were behind me. And yet, even though it had been so uncomfortable, it’d also been really cute watching Satsuki-san playing the part of the devoted wife. More importantly, I’d enjoyed spending time together. So now that our short-lived girlfriends dream was over, I figured we’d go back to how we always were—just two strangers who happened to be in the same friend group. But listening to her now…

“S-S-Satsuki-saaaaaan!” I blubbered.

“Huh? Wha—Rena-chin, are you crying?!” Kaho-chan exclaimed.

“Rena-chan?!”

“Wh-what’s wrong with you?” Satsuki-san asked.

I snuffled. All my hard work from these past two weeks had not been in vain.

“I-I’m crying because… Satsuki-san, you just said we were friends!”

“That’s all?”

“It’s a big deal, okay?”

Oh well. There went the waterworks. The dam had burst, and I couldn’t stop the tears from flowing.

I was sure the others would be totally disgusted with me, but then Kaho-chan took my arm on one side while Ajisai-san took the other. They both squeezed me tightly.

“Me too!” Kaho-chan said. “I’m your friend too, Rena-chin!”

“M-me too,” said Ajisai-san. “I’m your, uh…f-friend!”

“Kaho-chaaan… Ajisai-saaaan…”

Everyone was so kind…so very, very kind… Now I really couldn’t

stop crying. Hey, Mom, Dad, Baby Sis—look at how great my friend group is. *They're all so kind to me*, I thought. It felt like I was dreaming.

"You really are a weirdo," Satsuki-san with a cold glare. But that didn't change the fact that she'd called me her friend. And that was worth an internal giggle.

"Why are you smirking and sobbing your eyes out at the same time?" she asked.

"You're funny, Renako," Mai said, propping her chin up on her hands and giving me a mature grin. "That's why I'm such a fan."

"I'll never understand your taste," Satsuki-san said.

"Why not? I've always followed the same pattern," said Mai. "I like pretty things."

"You call someone dripping tears and snot pretty?"

"Yes, don't you?"

Mai looked at me and beamed like I had her spellbound. You know, I had to give this one to Satsuki-san—I didn't get how the hell Mai's taste worked either.

Just then, Satsuki-san pulled her handkerchief out of her pocket and gave it to me. Oh, so kind… My sweet friend.

"You're an eyesore," she said. "Also, everyone's looking at you."

"Eeep."

"Oh, here, take mine too," Ajisai-san said.

"Oh yeah, and mine!" Kaho-chan chimed in.

Now armed with their hankies, that brought me up to three handkerchiefs in all… Oh, the sweet, sweet handkerchiefs of friendship…

"Anyway," Satsuki-san said, "why are we here today? Surely we aren't celebrating my return to the friend group."

"Of course not," Mai said. "Why, that'd be foolish. That would mean we'd have to hold another party every single time you leave and come back."

"…Well, I'm not going to do it again."

"I don't mind if you do," Mai said. "I think you could drop in once a week or so. This kind of thing is fun."

“I said, I’m not going to do it again!”

Like giving a bone to a snarling dog, Mai thrust a long, thin package wrapped in paper under the considerably pissed-looking Satsuki-san’s nose.

“…What’s that?” Satsuki-san asked.

“Happy birthday, Satsuki,” Mai said.

Satsuki-san blinked. “Oh, that’s right,” she said. “I was so busy it completely slipped my mind.”

“Now you get to be the oneesan for a while,” Mai told her.

“True. But there’s really no point in lording over you the fact that I’m older, so I refuse to.”

Satsuki-san turned to us, and we pulled out various wrapped packages of our own.

“Here you go, Satsuki-chan,” Ajisai-san said. “Happy birthday.”

“Thank you, Sena. I’m glad you remembered.”

“Oh, friend of mine, Satsuki-san!” I cried. “This is a present from your dear friend Renako as proof of our friendship.”

“You’re so obnoxious…” she sighed.

“Ouch! Hey!”

Last came Kaho-chan with a big ol’ grin and a thumbs-up. “Whew!” she said. “I’m glad we got it to work out in time. I was freaking out over this for ages.”

Ah, so this was why Kaho-chan had been so anxious to get them to make up. She’d wanted us all to be able to celebrate Satsuki-san’s birthday together. It was the first birthday of any of the group since we’d all become friends, so we needed the whole crew, right?

“…You went this far for me?” Satsuki-san asked.

“Well, yeah!” Kaho-chan snapped a second thumbs-up like she was about to put on a one-woman thumb wrestling show.

“…Thank you,” Satsuki-san said. “Thank you, all of you.”

“Aww, Saa-chan’s blushing!” Kaho-chan crowed. “We got her embarrassed! Ooh, can I take a photo?”

“Absolutely not.”

“Got it! Say cheese, Saa-chan.”

“I’m going to smash you and that phone to pieces,” Satsuki-san threatened.

“Wait, why me too?!”

Ah yes, total chaos. Things were tenser, now that our voice of reason Satsuki-san was back. But who cared? It was a good thing. Without Satsuki-san, we were missing something.

Heh heh… She’d called me her friend…

I broke out into a grin. Maybe I’d never get back to normal at this rate.

As I sat there feeling all warm and happy inside, I heard Mai whisper to Satsuki-san, “See, we have lots of friends now, not like we used to. I’ll never be alone again, Satsuki.”

Satsuki-san nodded solemnly. “That’s true,” she said. “I think that…really is true.”

The four presents on the table supported Mai’s argument. *Yeah…* I thought. *It really is true.* I knew Mai didn’t mean it as an attempt to brush Satsuki off. I just figured she wanted Satsuki-san to feel a little less of the weight of responsibility all the time. The golden chains were too strong and bound too tight to ever let Satsuki-san go. But all the same, I’m pretty sure Satsuki-san had the keys to take off those chains whenever she wanted.

“By the way,” she said, changing the topic and rummaging through her bag, “I have something for you too, Mai.”

“Oh,” Mai said. “What is it? A trophy?”

“…Why would it be a trophy?” Satsuki-san asked.

“Well, I tried to come up with what would make me happy, and that was the natural first conclusion.”

“…Okay, I’ll keep that in mind for your birthday. But here.” Satsuki-san passed Mai a rolled up straw-looking piece of paper. Oh, those were the test results.

“Pardon?” Mai said.

“Go on, look at it,” Satsuki-san urged.

Mai looked down at the numbers and gaped. “…What?”

“You were so obsessed with training for that game that you didn’t study,” Satsuki-san said. “Remember what I told you? I work hard at everything.”

Satsuki-san set her chin down on her linked hands and smirked.

“And this,” she said, “is the first time I’ve beaten you.”

Post Epilogue

"AND THAT'S WHY," Mai argued, "I want you to comfort me."

"What on earth are you talking about?" I asked.

It was around noon on the first day of summer vacation, and I was at Mai's apartment sitting on a huge L-shaped sofa. Mai slumped against me, crestfallen. And she was close. Very close. I'd just come over to pick up my PS4, which I'd left there the other day, and now here we were. I guess it would have been too easy if I'd been able to just grab it and leave, huh?

"Not only did I lose to you after that whole ordeal," Mai sighed, "but then Satsuki beat me on our finals. It came as an incredible shock to me."

"Leaving Satsuki-san out of this for a moment," I said, "I'm pretty sure you've beaten me in a good 99-bajillion other ways."

"Of course I haven't. Ah, and then on top of that, I missed out on my chance to win you as my wife."

She sounded so truly despondent that I shut my mouth. I couldn't exactly talk, considering that I was the main cause of

her woe. I also felt awfully, awfully guilty for doing my best to shoot her down—both literally and figuratively.

But Mai's lips quirked up into a slight smile. "Well, no matter," she said. "I wasn't planning on marrying you the minute I won anyway."

"R-really now?" I asked.

"Oh, yes. I mean, honestly—battling to win your heart? This isn't the Shakespearean era. I'd much rather you choose to be with me willingly."

She declared it as proudly and earnestly as ever. You know, I had to admit that there was something kind of cool about it. But at the same time—

"Says the girl who went all out to win," I reminded her.

"Oh, I always take competitions seriously. It'd be an insult to my

opponents if I didn't. But, with that being said…" She laced her hands together on her stomach and sunk into a slouch. "I still lost… Two times in a row, and to you and Satsuki, no less."

"Uh-huh."

Mai had her hair down today, meaning she was in girlfriend mode, so I didn't think it was a good idea to give her too much ammo. Still, seeing Mai so uncharacteristically dejected made me feel kind of sorry for her. Besides, I'd been spending all my time with Satsuki-san lately and ignoring Mai completely. So… I figured it wouldn't hurt to give in a little…

"Oh, damn," I sighed. "Twist my arm, why don't you?"

Comfort her? Yeah, I'd comfort her all right.

I patted my skirt-covered lap. "Put your head here," I said.

"Pardon?"

"Just do it. I'm letting you."

Mai stared at me blankly. Hello? I'd thought she'd have been all gung-ho and practically leap on me, so what was the pause about? I broke out into a cold sweat. I'd let my little sister use my legs for a pillow before, so I hadn't thought much of it. I thought it'd been a fine idea.

Just then, the junior high Renako—asocial, angsty, and an a-hole—spoke to me. "Where'd you pull this from, a manga? Is this like a freaking thank-you kiss? Let's be real. Who would want a kiss from you? Please, you know full well that you're not that great. Ugh, and now you're too self-conscious to pull it off. No freaking way, dude."

Shut it, you! I told her. *You're wrong, because…uh… Okay, never mind. The point is that you're wrong!* I wouldn't do that anyway! And besides, Mai would be happy if I did! You don't know the first thing about Mai, so there!

"Come on," I said. "Put your head on my lap. Now."

"No, but—"

"Head. On. My. Lap!"

I yanked Mai's arm and plunked her head down on my thighs like I was grabbing a coconut. There! Lap pillow complete.

"You're awfully bossy today," she grumbled.

“And you’re awfully resistant. What’s gotten into you? You know that Satsuki-san’s not going to be attached at the hip to you anymore, so shouldn’t you have some other people to fall back on?”

As I mentioned the ryoutei conversation, Mai mumbled, “Hmmph… Well, I suppose so…”

This was the same girl who had zero problem with kissing (and worse!), so why was she so embarrassed about having her head in my lap? I mean, it wasn’t like I was totally shame-free either, but… I think my mortification had circled right back around to me being cool with it.

I stroked Mai’s hair. It smelled good—like a bright, sunny day.

“I know I’ve told you this before,” I said, “but you can mess up as many times as you need. I don’t mind. And the same thing goes for losing too. You always do your best, Mai, so it’s really not a problem.”

Mai gulped and then buried her face in my thighs. *Wh-whoa, watch it!* I thought. Fortunately, I realized a moment later that she wasn’t about to do anything particularly nasty; she was just hiding her embarrassment.

She kicked her legs, trying to stop me from looking at her face. “I feel so strange!” she said.

Ah, yes. Mai was struggling in the swamp of shame.

“I guess this is what happens when you’re used to getting nothing but a buttload of praise all the time,” I said.

“It’s because I’m always supposed to win,” said Mai. “I’ve barely ever had anyone recognize my efforts when I’ve lost.”

So, the experience of getting positive attention like this was new for her. Interesting. I was starting to enjoy myself.

“Mm-hmm,” I said. “But don’t worry. I recognize all your hard work.” I giggled. “Great job, Mai-chan. You’re a good little girl.” I giggled some more.

“Hush,” Mai said. “You’re so…impossible!”

Her ears turned even redder. It was like luring the mighty to fall prey to temptation, which lifted my own spirits a good deal.

But what was the harm? Mai was strong, and it wouldn’t hurt for her to slack off a bit. In fact, it made her more approachable. *Stop being the supadari all the time*, I thought. Just be a normal girl for a change.

There was no harm in it, particularly now, when she'd suppressed all her own desires every time she watched me and Satsuki-san go home together. She'd really, really been a big help to me.

"I wouldn't have found such a good friend in Satsuki-san if not for you," I said.

"I can't say I'm entirely happy about that," she admitted. "But if you're happy, then that definitely makes up for it."

I stroked Mai's hair again, feeling a bit nervous. It felt like I had the head of a sculpture worth a couple billion yen in my lap. But my heart also skipped a beat when I thought about how she showed this vulnerability to me and me alone. I mean, of course, it skipped a beat in a platonic way. Don't get me wrong; there was nothing romantic going on here.

"If only you were always so quiet like this," I said. "Then you'd be a lot easier to deal with."

"…Would that make you happier?" she asked.

That question gave me pause for a few seconds, but then I shook my head. "Hmm… Nah, I think I'm good with your usual self. Just get mad when you want to be mad, and smile when you want to smile. And you know it's okay to be down when you feel sad, right? Just be yourself, Mai."

Bending backward to be more likable was my job, thank you very much. Mai was perfectly fine the way she was. After all, that was what made me want to befriend her. I had to admit: demanding other people do the things I couldn't do was pretty selfish of me.

Mai sighed. "Renako," she said, "I'm falling for you all over again."

"Hmmph."

Mai yearned for people to recognize her ordinary self, whereas Satsuki-san longed for the exact opposite.

Feeling like I'd gone a bit overboard, I warned, "Just so you know, I mean all of this as a friend."

"You're free to think that," she said, "just as I'm free to love you. That's how being friends with Rena-fits works, doesn't it?"

"Stop trying to twist the narrative to suit your needs!"

Mai slowly raised herself off my lap. Her face moved in so close to mine that it filled my entire field of vision. My heart rate took it upon itself to skyrocket.

"Renako," she asked, "how many times did you and Satsuki kiss?"

"Uh. Um. Well."

She grabbed my wrist. *Oh god, I'm doomed*, I thought. Every last bit of her earlier composure was completely gone.

I counted on my fingers. There was that time I'd gone over to her place, the time she'd stayed over at mine, and that one time in Mai's bathroom, so that made…

"I think l-like three, maybe…?"

"Three kisses in two weeks?" she repeated. "My god, you really are something else…"

"H-hey, hold the phone!" I said. "It's not what it looks like!"

Satsuki-san started them all! I wasn't, like, being insanely horny or anything! I swear!

And as I readied my excuses, Mai swooped in and kissed me.

Oh god. This was my first kiss with Mai in two weeks. I mean, well… We were friends with Rena-fits, so it just counted as a friend kiss. This was chill, totally… Totally chill…

But then Mai licked her lips lasciviously and cupped my cheek. “If I should just be myself,” she said, “then does that mean I don’t have to bridle all these coarse feelings in me any longer?”

Uh, what was going on here? Could someone tell me why this felt like a horny version of The Purge?

“Mai, I’d really rather you bridled them a little…” I said. “I know we’re friends and all, but I don’t think friends, no matter how close they are, necessarily have to accept everything…”

“Of course,” she said, “I won’t do anything to hurt you.”

Then she kissed me a second time. She pushed me back down into the sofa, her lips still locked with mine. This was, I figured, a way for her to check that a little kissing wouldn’t hurt me. Well… I mean, it didn’t, not really…

This second kiss was a long one. Her lips feathered mine repeatedly, covering my mouth and nibbling like she was trying to taste me. My whole body went limp. I looked up at Mai as she straddled me, an elfin grin on her face and a spellbound look in her eyes. Oh god. Her looking at me like that mortified me.

I hid my face in my hands and confessed, “Um… Honestly, I feel kind of guilty for everything. As long as you’re not too forceful, I don’t feel like I really have the right to refuse you, but like…could you just, you know, be gentle…”

Mai looked pained. “Are you trying to drive me wild?”’

“No, that’s not what I meant!”

“Goodness, Renako. You’re no fair at all.”

She cupped my face in her hands and kissed me again. But she wasn’t using brute force this time. Even her tongue felt gentle when it slipped past my lips, and I wondered if that meant I was accepting Mai’s advances… Mind you, I wasn’t! I think!

At any rate, her tongue explored the inside of my mouth. My mind zoned out, every part of me focusing on Mai. Oh…my god… It was… intense.

“Anyway,” she said, “that makes three kisses.”

With the way she was going, it was more like three hundred, but whatever.

Mai smiled, seemingly having had her fill for the moment. “I love you, Renako,” she said. “Let’s make this a wonderful summer vacation.”

“Sure, but I mean… Okay, sure.”

Just as Satsuki-san was competitive against Mai, I guess Mai was just as competitive right back. Believe me, I’d gotten that lesson drilled into me real well.

God. No more dating contracts with other people for me. I’d learned from my many, many past mistakes…

Wait a sec. Forget dating contracts. No more dating, period! I wasn’t about to become Mai’s girlfriend, let alone anyone else’s. A relationship that elevated your heart rate, subjected you to mental torment, and gave you insomnia to boot? No, no, a thousand times no.

I pushed Mai off of me and shouted at her, “As friends, thank you very much! We’re making this a wonderful summer vacation as friends, FYI.”

Thus, the Mai vs. Satsuki-san vs. me match came to an end…but new shenanigans were just around the corner.

Intermission: Satsuki and Amaori

Satsuki

Hey, Amaori.

<Message deleted.>

<Message deleted.>

Satsuki

Thank you.

Satsuki: Hey, Amaori.

<Message deleted.>

<Message deleted.>

Satsuki: Thank you.

Afterword

NICE TO MEET YOU. My name is Teren Mikami.

The afterword is only going to be one page this time. There was just so much I wanted to write in the main book that I started getting worried, like, *Will I even need an afterword at this point?* But in the end, I came to my senses and somehow managed to secure a page for it.

Anyway. Here we are at *There's No Freaking Way I'll Be Your Lover… Unless?* Volume 2. I wrote this story in the hopes that all the readers could come to like Satsuki-san through it. If I continue, I'm planning on having an Ajisai-san arc next, so I'll do my best to get that published. I'm hard at work on that! (And, perhaps, also hard at work on playing Ring Fit Adventure.)

Now for the acknowledgments. I'm the very model of a good author, so I'll do my acknowledgments even when I have a limited space.

THANK YOU, EVERYONE!

Wow, that was the shortest acknowledgments section known to man.

Oh, right, this series has a manga now too! Musshu-sensei is doing the artwork. Yay! Between this and my other work, *AriOto's* Volume 2 coming out on July 15th, I hope that you'll all enjoy these girl-only romcoms.

Hope to see you around somewhere! Teren Mikami, signing off!

Afterword

Hello, I'm Eku Takushima. Welcome to Volume 2 of
There's No Freaking Way I'll Be Your Lover! Unless...

Once again, poor Renako got her fair share of manhandling.
Good job toughing it out, Renako!
I'm delighted to still be working on this beloved series.
To the author, Teren Mikami-sensei,
The editor, K. Hara-san,
And the book designer:

Thank you very much!

Takushima Eku

Creator Bios

AUTHOR BIO

Mikami Teren

BORN ON DECEMBER 16 IN SAITAMA

I think about girls' feelings for one another for approximately 16 hours a day, and in the end, I always come to the same conclusion: I have no idea how any of this works. People really are hard to figure out, huh?

My favorite drinks are bubbly water and tea lattes.

It's all going to be okay, because this is a Teren Mikami yuri book!

ILLUSTRATOR BIO

Takeshima Eku

BORN ON APRIL 23 IN OKAYAMA

What with this volume and the manga, I'm having a grand old time in T*here's No Freaking Way I'll Be Your Lover! Unless…* land. I'm as happy as could be that I worked on this book!

These days, I've been thinking an awful lot, "Man, art is hard, huh?" But I'll just keep burying my face in my cat's belly and trucking along.along.

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